Ephemeral Gods by scoups_ahoy

Series: Ephemeral Gods [1]
Category: SEVENTEEN (Band)
Genre: Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Gangsters, Angst, Bottom Yoon Jeonghan, Chapter 23: Author's Note Please Read, Denial of Feelings, Dirty Talk, Dom/sub Undertones, Enemies to Lovers, Gun Violence, Hand Jobs, Heavy Angst, M/M, Major Character Injury, Minor Character Death, Panic Attacks, Pining, Protective Choi Seungcheol | S.Coups, Rough Kissing, Rough Sex, Slow Burn, Smut, Top Choi Seungcheol | S.Coups, Torture, Toxic Relationships, Trust Issues, Violence, bodyguard!seungcheol, briefly gyuhan are a thing, gang boss!jeonghan, i have been informed that is in fact a fairly toxic relationship, implied/referenced past rape/non-con, it has good intentions though, just the execution is not... great, kind of?, like i'm not gonna lie to you it's rough, undercover agent!seungcheol
Characters: Boo Seungkwan, Cameos by Other Kpop Idols - Character, Choi Seungcheol | S.Coups, Chwe Hansol | Vernon, Hong Jisoo | Joshua, Jeon Wonwoo, Kim Mingyu, Kwon Soonyoung | Hoshi, Lee Chan | Dino, Lee Jihoon | Woozi, Lee Seokmin | DK, Original Male Character(s), Wen Jun Hui | Jun, Xu Ming Hao | The8, Yoon Jeonghan
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Summary:

Right now, Jeonghan resembles his late father so much it's uncanny. He's all icy cruelty dressed head to toe in black, running a long, thin finger along the sleek edge of his switchblade - the same one he tried to threaten Seungcheol with. Playing with it right where his victim can see it; he's coolly indifferent to the whimpers muffled by the man's gag, glancing up at him with dark eyes, bow-shaped lips quirked up in a smirk. Right now, he's an angel with the soul of a devil; a man with the powers of a god.

Seungcheol is a NIS agent, undercover in a world where one moment loyalty is everything and in the next it means nothing. His job? Take down Yoon Jeonghan, the young, new leader of the most dangerous gang in Seoul. It should be the easiest thing in the world. Until Seungcheol finds himself falling in love with Jeonghan.

Unfinished/Rewrite Coming December 25th, 2020. Please read Chapter 23, an author's note, for more information!

Relationships: Choi Seungcheol | S.Coups/Yoon Jeonghan
Series: Ephemeral Gods [1]
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Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> unfortunately, i have had to leave this version of EG unfinished; however a rewrite will be coming chapter by chapter December 25th, 2020. keep an eye out! and check out the author's note in ch 23 for more information!

one: one & only

The weather this time of year is Seungcheol's favorite; past the heavy winter storms but before the oppressive summer heat. Gentle rains and light fog, sweaters in the morning and shorts in the afternoon. He *loves* it, loves how soft and warm his hoodie feels right now, the little fuzzies on the inside brushing against his skin. It's comforting. Something he doesn't get a lot of these days. Sighing, he tugs his phone out from his pocket with trembling hands and checks the time. Six-oh-three. So the section chief's alarm went off three minutes ago but there's still no call from him yet. Even though he said he'd contact Cheol as soon as he woke up.

With a sigh he pockets his phone and looks back at the view before him. Six months living in the most expensive apartment complex in Seoul still hasn't hit him, if he's being honest, and he's not sure it ever will.

Suppose I should consider myself lucky. I don't think there's many jobs that land people in a nine billion won apartment rent free.

And then he thinks, *that's definitely one way to look at it.*

Just down below the balcony, maybe two kilometers away, he can see the Han River lit up like a starry night. The sun will rise in about half an hour and if he squints Seungcheol thinks he can make out some people already jogging along the banks, but he's not sure. He knows he should probably be out there himself, exercising instead of not sleeping, but… he's just so *tired.* You know, because of said not sleeping. Not for lack of trying of course. Every night he lies awake, tossing and turning and *thinking.*

Maybe whenever the section chief calls I could ask for stronger pills. Since the ones he gave me before I left stopped working last week.

As if on cue his phone vibrates angrily in his pocket - *six-oh-eight* - and shaking hands fish it out once more. God, they can't seem to *stop* shaking lately and he doesn't know why. Maybe because he hasn't been taking the pills since last Wednesday but Jesus Christ that's -

"Gwajangnim," Cheol gets out as soon as he picks up the call and on the other end Kim Byungchul huffs.

"Sorry I took so long, kid. Slept right through my alarm." There's rustling, like maybe he's getting dressed, and then he sighs. "Today's the big day, right? Yoon's son is coming back?"

Maybe *that's* why his hands haven't stopped shaking. "Yeah, and I'm - I'm worried."

"You're always worried, Choi."

There it is, the casually dismissive tone Kim always takes with him. *If it's so easy,* he wants to say, *then you come out here and do this job.* But he doesn't, and says, "Of course I am," instead. "I'm undercover in the most dangerous gang in Seoul, as the boss's bodyguard. The others have all come around to me but if Yoon's son doesn't trust me then what am I supposed to do?"

"Look at his dossier," Kim says as if Seungcheol hasn't spent the last four nights or so pouring over it. All two pages of it.

"I have, *gwajangnim.* But there's not much there. Definitely not enough for me to go off of." Running a hand through his hair, trying to ignore the tremors, Seungcheol wonders silently, sort of morbidly, if he should take up smoking. *Might help with the nerves.* "He's been in our prison system for almost three years and that's all we have on him?"

There's more rustling now, something that sounds like a cupboard closing and Kim sighs again. "What can I say, Choi? Yoon Jeonghan is smart. Smarter

than his father. If you're that concerned talk to your uncle. He knows the bastard better than any NIS dossier. Practically raised him."

The thought should be unnerving, that Seungcheol's uncle raised a man like that but Choi Jaesung is… interesting in and of himself. Cheol just sighs because things shouldn't be this hard. The NIS should have access to Jaesung's information, seeing as how he's an *informant* and all. But as usual with bureaucracy and the NIS, shit's fucked. "Yeah okay. I'll see what he has to say."

"Good. If that's it, Choi, I really need to get going."

As usual. "Of course, *gwajangnim.* I'll keep you informed."

The call ends before Seungcheol is able to say anything more and he sighs heavily, pocketing his phone once again - but not before another glance at the time. Nearing six-fifteen, which means Yoon Sanghoon will be up in about an hour and fifteen minutes and Seungcheol needs to have his breakfast ready by then. Especially since today is the day his beloved son returns from prison.

Cheol heads back inside, tugging the hood off his head, and he's glad he already completed the bulk of the galbitang before six and all that remains, really, is for everything to cook. Which takes way too fucking long, if you ask him. It generally requires Seungcheol waking up at about four-thirty each morning and he can't help but wonder if every gang boss has their bodyguard cook for them too? And of course a rich bastard like Yoon Sanghoon would want something like galbitang. Every. fucking. morning.

After checking that it all is cooking the way it should be Seungcheol decides he has time to kill. He finds his NIS-issued Samsung tablet and whips out the infamous Yoon Jeonghan dossier, just to see if there's anything he's missed in his almost-religious studying of it the last few days.

Doubtful.

He knows it by heart now. *Full Name: Yoon Jeonghan. Alias(es): Angel. Birthday: 1995 10 04.* Can recite his height, weight, blood type, birthplace -

even knows his fucking zodiac sign. The Chinese one too (but they share that one so does it really count?). Has a brother four years younger than him who apparently got the long end of the stick, as he's attending college (and really enjoys it too, but that knowledge comes from personal experience with the young man and not some dossier). Can tell you that, according to records, Jeonghan probably killed his first man when he was fifteen. Woke up the next morning to attend classes at one of the most prestigious high schools in Seoul - like the ones you might see on *Sky Castle* or something - at which he was near top of his class. Completed his military service right out of high school like a good boy.

And then after that there's… not a lot. Reports and details allude to the fact that he's probably killed a lot of fucking people on behalf of his father. He was arrested for possession of marijuana and served about half of his five-year sentence, as of today. Out on good behavior and all that.

Bunch of bullshit, really. The NIS is pretty certain the arrest was a set-up, that Sanghoon needed eyes on the inside and couldn't go himself.

Or so Seungcheol's been told.

Eyes scanning the file, Seungcheol sighs at the few pictures attached. There's one of Jeonghan a mere few weeks before his arrest, coming home to Incheon International looking like a goddamn idol. Hair bleached - always fucking bleached - and falling so casually into his eyes. Black clothes on black clothes on black clothes, with the exception of his gray, four million won coat. Massive, designer sunglasses covering up a decent amount of his face but Seungcheol would know it anywhere, he's spent so long studying this fucking dossier. Knows that Yoon Jeonghan is probably one of the most beautiful men he's ever seen and if it wasn't for the fact that he was an assassin, drug dealer, and gang boss's son, he could probably have quite a lucrative career as a model.

But that's pretty much *all* he knows about Jeonghan, with the exception of little anecdotes the others have told him. Like the fact that he and Mingyu had been involved in a friends with benefits thing before his arrest. Or how he and Minghao once spent hours going over the different ways to kill a man without a sound. Each of the gang members has a story involving him but

they don't talk *about* him. Nothing personal, nothing intimate. It's like he's some sort of god. One they all fear. That much has been obvious, from the way these stories are told. The way no one seems to want to say anything that might come back to bite them in the ass. The sunbaes his father's age, Jeonghan's group of friends that he's found in the gang's young up-and-comers - even his own brother who worships the ground he walks on would think twice before crossing him.

Which really, really, *really* does not inspire confidence.

Men like Yoon Sanghoon, Seungcheol can deal with. Was literally *taught* to deal with them at the National Police University and his first few cases with the NIS. Men like Yoon Sanghoon, they're predictable. They want power and will do anything to get it. And once they have it, they won't let you forget they have it. Sometimes it's little things - *like forcing his fucking bodyguard to make his galbitang every morning* - and other times it's big things. Very big things, like taking out an entire branch of their gang because of one traitor, one small hole. Like Sanghoon did a few years ago. And that, that's easy to deal with. Predictable, even. Only someone who's bad at their undercover job would not anticipate an outcome like that - because men like Yoon Sanghoon don't notice the details. They don't really care about the journey, just the destination, as it were.

But men like Yoon Jeonghan? Clever, calculating, intelligent men like Yoon Jeonghan? Those are the scary ones - because they're unpredictable. And that's what Seungcheol can't wrap his head around. He can predict almost every decision Sanghoon makes. Knows the smaller, day-to-day operations he leaves to his right-hand man, Cheol's own uncle Jaesung. Knows he would rather lose a million incompetent men than one good one. Knows that, at his core, Sanghoon looks out for himself. But Jeonghan? Seungcheol doesn't know him at all. Doesn't know if he'd take a bullet for his men or not. Doesn't know if he'd take out an entire branch of the gang the way his father did. Doesn't know what he'd torture someone for, what he'd kill someone for.

What he'd spare someone for. If anything.

It's infuriating because Seungcheol can't plan. Doesn't know how to act around him. And he's been stressing about this for days now, can't sleep because it keeps him up at night and his goddamn sleeping pills stopped working and -

Pain erupts like a fire on his right palm and the tablet falls from his hands, clattering on the floor. The screen is - cracked? No wait, the corner's just shattered. And there's shards of glass embedded in his skin, just below his thumb.

Great.

The flames licking beneath his skin threaten to engulf his entire hand and Seungcheol hurries to the kitchen sink, trying to be quiet as he goes, but holy *shit* who knew a palm full of glass would hurt this much? Most of it rinses away under the thick stream of water, along with the blood, and a few carefully placed pinches take care of the rest. And in the quiet aftermath, patting his patched-up hand dry with a towel, Seungcheol decides that he hates Yoon Jeonghan. If not on principle then for *this,* for making him more stressed than his father ever has.

At exactly seven-thirty Yoon Sanghoon wakes up and it takes some time for him to get out of bed. He looks bad today. Skin paler than usual, shaking hands, heavy, fatigued movements. And if Seungcheol knew any better he'd assume it'd been a sleepless night for Sanghoon too. But indeed he *does* know better. So when he serves Sanghoon his fucking galbitang, he offers a falsely sincere, "Feeling any better today, sir?"

This has been their routine for a couple weeks now, Sanghoon shuffling from his bedroom looking worse as the days go on, Seungcheol pretending he cares *("do you think it's a cold, sir, or maybe the flu?")*, and…

"No but it doesn't matter because Jeonghan's coming home today."

Hmm. Well it's a different answer than usual but Seungcheol lets that slide because of course the man would have some sort of feeling regarding his

son's return to society.

If a gang can be called that.

"Oh that's right," Seungcheol says as he dishes a bowl for himself and returns to the table. "It's been three years, yeah?"

"Almost," Sanghoon responds around a bite of the beef, sauce dripping down his chin. *Jesus.* "And I've missed having him around."

Sure you have, even though you were the one who sent him there in the first place. "Are you two close?"

Sanghoon chews as he thinks and Cheol uses the silence to bite into a chunk of beef for himself. Damn, not to toot his own horn but he's getting *really* good at making this shit. *Better be after six fucking months.* "I think so. Closer than my father and I ever were, at least. I'd trust him to take over in my absence wholeheartedly."

See, men like Sanghoon are easy: offer them food and a sense of companionship they think they can count on and they'll tell you almost anything. Because they feel as if they have nothing to lose, due to the immense amounts of power and wealth they hold. But something tells Seungcheol that Jeonghan doesn't revere power and money the way his father does. Swallowing his bite, he says, "Think he'll like me?"

Sanghoon cracks a smile at this, showing off perfectly white teeth. "Who wouldn't like you, kid? You've been with us for a few months now and everyone else loves you." He reaches out to clasp a trembling hand on Cheol's shoulder. His grip is weaker than it should be. "I'm glad I listened to Jaesung-ah and let you in."

I am too, you fucking murderer. Because soon I'm taking you down, your son along with you. Seungcheol just smiles. "I am too, sir. Thank you for the opportunity."

Men like Sanghoon enjoy having their egos stroked. Enjoy feeling like they've done something important. Predictably he smiles at this and releases

Seungcheol's shoulder. "Jeonghan will like you, kid, so don't worry too much. As long as you don't do anything to piss him off when you first meet him he's really not hard to get along with."

Seungcheol really has no choice but to hope he's right. He can't risk Jeonghan thinking he's a rat or anything. That could be the end of this whole campaign. The end of him.

The energy at the gang's headquarters is more vibrant than Seungcheol's ever felt it and he knows it's due to Jeonghan's impending arrival. Mingyu and Joshua were sent out about an hour ago to collect him, the former practically bouncing around at the prospect of being with his friend (or lover or whatever they are) again. Which had been a sight to see; all one hundred and eighty-seven centimeters of him vibrating in place while Sanghoon had given them instructions, as if he *wasn't* one of the gang's most preeminent assassins with more kills under his belt than Seungcheol had ever seen. No, he'd all but run out of the building, gun almost slipping from its designated spot in his belt more than once, like an overexcited puppy when its owner returns from work.

Which, going off of the few things Seungcheol knows about Jeonghan and the nature of his relationship with Mingyu, might not be far from the truth.

As everyone waits for Sanghoon's venerated son to return, Cheol sticks close to his uncle.

Even though he hates to admit it, there's a lot Seungcheol has in common with Choi Jaesung. They have what his mother always referred to as the "Choi nose" - the unfortunate thing that seems to take up half their faces. His eyes are wide and brown like Seungcheol's, with big, rough features, he, his brother, and Cheol all must have inherited from a distant relative. Jaesung tends to be quieter than not, tends to keep to himself and analyze rather than engage and call attention to himself. He's loyal to an unwavering fault. Would do anything for the people he loves.

The only difference between them?

The people Jaesung loves are gangsters, cold-blooded killers. And Seungcheol never would've sold himself out as an informant if the situations were reversed.

Guess that's where his loyalty ends.

Cheol sits beside him in his office near the top floor, watching as he works, waiting for a moment when he could speak. On the floors below them reside the number of "legitimate ventures" Sanghoon conducts his business through and he must have some high-ranking official or two under his thumb to keep this shit going. It's almost ridiculous how blatantly obvious the gang activity is, and a part of Seungcheol can't help but wonder how Jeonghan might run things if he were in charge.

The moment Jaesung sits back from his computer Cheol swoops in.

"Can I ask you a question, *samchon?"*

Jaesung spares him a glance as he stretches his fingers, taking a break from whatever it is he's working on. It's all in English and Seungcheol has always had issues reading English. Could never get it down. "What is it?"

"I'm curious about Jeonghan," he says, point blank. Despite the fact that he *really* shouldn't, Sanghoon trusts his right-hand man more than anyone else so Cheol knows there's nothing in here - no bugs, no recording devices. *It's almost too easy.* "There's not much about him in the file I was given and I'm a little nervous, to be honest. How should I act around him?"

There's silence between them for a few moments as Jaesung reclines in his incredibly expensive office chair, no doubt thinking. Seungcheol waits patiently as he does and runs a hand through his hair - the one he injured this morning - grateful that they both seem to have stopped shaking. For now. When Jaesung finally speaks his voice is soft-spoken as it always is. Pensive. "Jeonghan is smart, a hell of a lot smarter than Sanghoon. Than anyone else here."

Seungcheol sighs as his anxiety spikes just a bit more. "That's basically what Kim said too. What else can you tell me?"

Their eyes meet and Jaesung sighs. "The members are everything to him. Especially the younger ones. So it'll mean a lot to him that they like you. Chan especially. He babies that kid more than Sanghoon does. Always has." He looks away again, towards his monitor, and Cheol knows the conversation is coming to an end. *Damn it.* "As long as you don't do anything that'll piss him off initially, you should be fine. You think Sanghoon carries grudges?" He snorts. "It's nothing compared to the hate Jeonghan can carry in his heart."

"As long as you don't do anything to piss him off when you first meet him he's really not hard to get along with."

Even Jeonghan's own father and the man who basically raised him recognize that behavior in him. Which is great. "I see."

With that Jaesung returns to his report, fingers gliding across the keyboard, and Cheol sits back in his own chair with a sigh. Internally he creates a report of his own, adding on to Jeonghan's file.

Apparently he's incredibly smart. Everyone around here loves him but they also love me so that should help my standing with him. All I have to do is not make him mad. Which hopefully will be easier than it seems.

He wonders if he should approach Jeonghan from a flirty direction. Bat his long eyelashes, crank up the old Choi charm, lay it on thick, and get close to him that way. Get in good with him by getting in bed with him. It's definitely a possibility, one Seungcheol is decently confident in. He knows he's attractive, knows how to flirt, how to seduce. How to get under someone's skin. But the real question is would Jeonghan go for that, or would he see right through him? If he'd even be attracted to Seungcheol, that is.

If Mingyu's anything to go off of he likes massive, overexcited men who are as adept at killing as they are handsome.

Cheol's not certain he fits that type exactly.

Out of nowhere Jaesung's phone vibrates on the desk, jarring them both from their respective focuses, and he answers it silently. Cheol thinks he can make

out Sanghoon's voice on the other end. *Is Jeonghan here?* After a clipped "yes sir" Jaesung ends the call and turns to Seungcheol.

"Get your game face on, kid. He's here."

Up close, in person, Yoon Jeonghan is so much… *more* than Seungcheol was expecting. More intimidating, more elegant. More handsome. His hair is shorter than any of the pictures Cheol's seen of him, washed of its bleached silver-blonde (prison'll do that to a person) and raven black like his father's. He actually looks a lot like Sanghoon this way. Just less muscular. Less obviously threatening. Dark clothes hang off his thin frame - *I thought people were supposed to gain muscle in prison?* - and dark eyes examine his surroundings. His friends all swarm him as Sanghoon stands off to the side, gaunt and pale, and Jeonghan greets them with a voice Seungcheol wasn't expecting. It's low and warm, the kind of voice that just draws you in. But Seungcheol stays at his spot beside Jaesung, waiting for Jeonghan to come to him.

And when he does, Cheol isn't quite prepared for it.

He has sad eyes. Sad eyes that hide a lot more than they should. Sad eyes that seem to sear their way into Seungcheol's soul. Resting above one is a white scar that slits right through his eyebrow, narrowly missing said eye by a few centimeters. His perfect little bow-shaped lips quirk up into a slight smirk before he licks them, those eyes of his travelling down Seungcheol's body and back up again, slowly drinking him in.

Cheol can't help the pride that surges like warmth through his body at the look on Jeonghan's face, the obvious desire pooling dark in his eyes. *Looks like seducing him is definitely on the table.* "Mr. Yoon, I - "

In an instant he looks away, meeting Jaesung's gaze with a friendly smile, any trace of lust or flirtation gone from his features.

So that's how we're playing this.

“It’s been a while, *samchon,”* he says to Jaesung.

Samchon? Seungcheol knew they were close but has he always called Jaesung that? He’s not sure why that rubs him so weird.

“It had indeed, Han.” He reaches out to clasp Jeonghan’s shoulder, returning his smile with one of his own. “Prison treat you well?”

He shrugs like it’s the most casual inquiry in the world. “More or less. What matters is that I did what *abeoji* needed from me, and it’s over now.”

“Indeed.” Turning towards Seungcheol, Jaesung smiles. “Han, this is my nephew, Seungcheol. He’s been your father’s bodyguard for - “

“Six months,” Jeonghan says, as if he already knows everything there is to know about him and those haunting eyes of his return to Seungcheol’s face. They’re about the same height, give or take a few centimeters, yet Jeonghan just seems to tower over him. And once again he sweeps his eyes down Cheol’s body but this time they’re harder, more analytical. He holds out his hand, a pale, dainty thing with long delicate fingers, and Seungcheol takes it in a handshake.

Those pretty fingers of his wrap around Cheol’s hand surprisingly firmly, calluses rubbing against Cheol’s own, and the smirk Jeonghan gives him seems to say, *“didn’t expect that, did you?”*

“What happened to your hand?” he asks in that low voice, words slurred just the tiniest bit so that Seungcheol has no choice but to lean in to hear him better.

“What - ? Oh.” Yeah, his hand. Cheol glances down at the limb in question, realizing that it stopped throbbing almost immediately after he’d dug the glass from it, realizing he’d *forgotten* he’d even injured it in the first place, especially since no one else had noticed the bandages. And then he looks back at Jeonghan, meeting his curious gaze. “Broke my tablet and got glass in it.”

Jeonghan's silent for a few moments, just staring at Seungcheol, and Christ is it unnerving. There's something in his gaze that Seungcheol doesn't like, something hiding behind the scrutinizing looks, the fleeting want, the sad slope of his eyelids that unsettles him. And he can't place it. "You must be pretty clumsy to manage that."

"What can I say," Seungcheol shrugs. "I'm damn good at everything else I do. Just not holding my electronics."

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips but Cheol can't tell if it's sincere or not. "Apparently." Another drag of his eyes down Seungcheol's body and he's gone, heading off deeper into the building, beside his father and flanked by his friends. After that the crowd disperses, following after Yoon Jeonghan in some sort of way, leaving Seungcheol more or less mystified. Trying to figure out what to make of what just happened.

"He can be a lot," Jaesung says quietly, no doubt in response to Seungcheol's silence. "Takes some getting used to. But you did well."

There's a moment of silence between them while Seungcheol tries to find his voice. "He doesn't seem as smart as everyone keeps telling me." *And I'm not sure how those hands of his manage to look the way they do after three years in prison and who knows how long of handling a gun.*

The look on his face must be familiar to Jaesung because he sighs heavily. "Don't underestimate him, Seungcheol. Plenty of people have made that mistake before and didn't live to talk about it."

The idea is almost laughable, the phrase comically morbid and seemingly out of place about a man like Jeonghan, and Seungcheol looks at his uncle with a frown. "Yeah? Then how do you know about it, *samchon?"*

For a moment Jaesung says nothing, only looks at Seungcheol with hard eyes he remembers his father having. "Because I've been there when he's killed them. Every single one of them."

The day goes on as it usually does: Seungcheol stays at Sanghoon's side during meetings and by five-thirty they're in the Maserati, heading back to the apartment. The only difference with today is that the entire time Cheol was with Sanghoon, so was Jeonghan - and his staring was incessant. Every time he spoke he could feel Jeonghan's eyes burning into him. Every time he moved he could feel Jeonghan's eyes following him, as if memorizing him. Studying him. And Seungcheol *hated* it. He'd never been more on edge in his life. The few times he'd turned towards Jeonghan with the intention of demanding to know *why* he was staring he'd get a flirty, teasing smile before looking away.

Only to look back at Cheol the moment he returned to whatever it was he'd been doing.

Christ, it's infuriating. *Yoon Jeonghan* is infuriating and by the time Seungcheol goes to bed that night he hates him more than he had that morning. Actually, there's a lot Seungcheol hates right now. Hates the way his sleeping pills sit on his bedside table like they're mocking him. Hates the way lights from the city below still find their way up through his window. Hates the way his section chief hasn't texted him back after Cheol's *"met Yoon Jeonghan"* message sent at ten-thirty a.m., and it's almost eleven at night.

Don't let him get to you, Cheol.

Sometimes the voice in his head sounds a lot like his mother and it tends to give the same vague advice she always thought was helpful. Because of course that's easier said than done. All it took was one look and now Yoon Jeonghan's burrowed under his skin, taking over his mind, and as far as Cheol's concerned there's no real way to get rid of him. Besides the obvious one. But he needs authorization from Chief Kim before he could put a bullet between his eyes.

If Jeonghan would ever let him get that close.

Cheol's alarm goes off at four-thirty as always and he drags himself out of bed to start the fucking galbitang. Once it's good to just cook he tugs his phone back out and goes through his messages and notifications. Still nothing from his section chief, which is weird. Especially since he should be awake right now. But whatever. What else is new with the NIS, right?

Seven-thirty comes and goes but no Sanghoon. Seven-forty-five and there's no more steam rising from the galbitang – as well as no Sanghoon. When eight o'clock hits anxiety has already made itself at home in Seungcheol's mind and he prepares for the worst when he enters the gang boss's bedroom.

The door opens slowly, silently, giving way to a perfectly kept room that looks as if no one has ever lived in it. Lack of dust is the only tell-tale sign that someone does indeed at least sleep here but besides that, there's nothing about it that is personal or homey. Like the man who resides in it, this bedroom is cold and sharp.

The man who resides in it lays motionless and eerily pale on his bed, one hand hanging limply off the edge.

Definitely the worst, Seungcheol decides. Because as far as he can tell, no one broke in, there are no wounds or injuries. Yoon Sanghoon is just… dead.

Dead, and Seungcheol found him. Seungcheol who's been part of this gang for a mere six months. Seungcheol who "left" the NIS out of nowhere for this. Seungcheol who has to tell Jeonghan that his father is dead with no signs as to who, why, or how.

If it looks bad to himself, he can only imagine how Jeonghan will take it.

"As long as you don't do anything that'll piss him off initially, you should be fine. You think Sanghoon carries grudges? It's nothing compared to the hate Jeonghan can carry in his heart."

Great.

Seungcheol is well and royally fucked.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading! love you guys~

Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

just a reminder to heed the tags; there is some torture and gun violence in this chapter but it's not too graphic! there is also a very very brief reference to past non-con in the beginning.

enjoy! <3

two: angel

For the first time in almost three years, Jeonghan wakes up with a hangover. He knew he would last night when he started that second bottle of soju but truth be told, he really did not give a fuck because come morning, there would be no loud cell mates waking him up, no lecherous guards with their roaming hands and eyes. No shitty prison food, no politics, no pretenses. Come morning there would just be his expensive, comfortable bed and - and *oh.*

Mingyu.

Jeonghan smiles despite the hangover nagging his body because he feels Mingyu's warmth pressed up against his back, realizes Mingyu hadn't let him go all night. A first for them.

He must've really missed me.

Sighing softly he shifts in Mingyu's strong arms to press gentle kisses against his temple. He groans in his sleep and buries his face deeper into Jeonghan's pillow. No doubt he's hungover too, and Jeonghan wonders if there's any ingredients to make haejangguk with. Not that he'd be able to do it himself; no he'd have to wake Mingyu up and that would take a goddamn earthquake. At the very least. When he moves from the bed Jeonghan's entire body protests in so many different ways for so many different reasons. Pain erupts across his lower back and ass from taking Mingyu's dick three separate times last night, each one of those times rougher and more desperate as they went.

His stomach churns and his head pounds and his throat aches and Jeonghan *revels* in every one of these physical sensations. Because it's been so long since he last felt them in connection to a hangover.

Trembling legs find their way around the room through muscle memory, following the trace amounts of sunlight let in by the window curtains. Jeonghan dresses, slipping his phone into his jeans pocket, and gingerly crosses the room to the bathroom. And as he brushes his teeth he muses that he doesn't recognize the man in the mirror. He's not the Jeonghan he's used to, the one he knows.

That Jeonghan has long, blonde hair and fuller cheeks. The band tattooed around his right forearm isn't starting to fade. He has hope in his eyes because he thinks his life is perfect. That Jeonghan is happier, young. Naive, all things considered.

The Jeonghan that stares back at him in the mirror is *none* of that. His hair is far too short, far too black. Hard eyes, one adorned with a scar he loathes. Gaunt cheeks and sickly pale skin. Hands that he used to pride himself on for being delicate and soft now look too rough, too battle-worn, little white scars etched into the knuckles. This new Jeonghan knows more now. Knows how difficult and cruel this life can be. This new Jeonghan looks like complete and utter shit hungover and with a grunt he rinses his toothpaste-mouth out with water and exits the bathroom on stronger legs.

His guests from last night are strewn around his apartment in varying degrees of sleep. Seokmin and Joshua have taken up residence on one of the couches and Soonyoung and Jihoon claimed the other. Wonwoo's passed out on the recliner in what looks to be the most uncomfortable position known to man, his glasses still on. Junhui and Minghao apparently made do on the floor with the excess pillows from Jeonghan's bed last night though he doesn't quite remember that happening. And through Chan's open door he can hear both Vernon *and* Seungkwan snoring louder than fucking jet engines.

Sitting at the island in the kitchen, awake and focused on his laptop is Chan himself.

Jeonghan smiles at his younger brother's form, hard at work, and makes his way over to engulf him in a hug from behind. The high-backed stool Chan sits on blocks him a bit but he makes it work because it's been way too long since he hugged his little brother.

"Hyung!" Chan exclaims in a hushed voice, immediately closing his laptop. He reaches up to hold Jeonghan's arms, which are currently draped across his shoulders, and leans into this weird hug. Which Jeonghan appreciates, more than he can put into words. He knows he must smell awful but if there's anyone he's missed most during his time away it was his sweet dongsaeng. "You're awake," Chan mumbles.

Jeonghan nuzzles him, smiling when he realizes that Chan's hair smells the way it always has and it warms Jeonghan's heart to know that his precious brother never once changed his fucking shampoo in three years. "I am. And so are you."

"I have an essay due tonight," he says quietly. "I'm so close to graduating, hyung."

"Yeah?" Jeonghan asks as he leans down to kiss Chan's cheek. His brother might be twenty-two now *(twenty-two!)* but to Jeonghan he'll always be the sweet ten-year-old blinking back sleep as he promised not to tell *abeoji* that Jeonghan was sneaking out again. "I'm so proud of you, Channie. You've been working so hard."

"I have been. And I'm - I'm glad you got out before I graduated, hyung," he murmurs, squeezing Jeonghan's forearm. "I really want you there to see me walk."

"Aish, of course I'll be there, Channie. I wouldn't miss that for the world." He gives Chan's cheek another kiss before pulling away, heading towards the refrigerator. "Do we have anything to make haejangguk with?"

"I placed a delivery order for some about ten minutes ago."

Jeonghan turns to look at his brother and his heart stops for the briefest of seconds because holy shit, when did Chan get so… mature looking? Old,

even. God, Jeonghan's still not used to this, remembering how long he was gone for. Last time he saw Chan was the day of his sentencing, about three years ago. He'd apparently begged their father to let him go, even after Jeonghan threatened him on pain of death not to attend because he refused to let his little brother see him like that. But Chan had hugged him so hard, whispering, "I'll miss you, hyung," against his shirt. God, he'd looked so young back then, so naive. Just like Jeonghan had been. Eyes full of tears he wouldn't shed in the presence of his hyung, letting Jeonghan ruffle his hair with a less than comforting, "I'll only be gone a few years, Channie." And now he's an adult, graduating from SNU in eleven months with a bachelors' degree in medicine.

All of his friends are adults now. Adults making their own way in the world, rising through the ranks of his father's gang better than Jeonghan expected. And he's never been prouder.

"Hyung? Are you gonna just… stand there with the fridge door open?"

His brother's confused tone snaps him back to reality and he closes the refrigerator. "Sorry, Channie. I was just spacing out. Thank you for ordering some haejangguk. You got enough for everyone?"

Chan nods, looking rather pleased with himself. "I did! Even got extra, just in case Mingyu eats more like he usually does."

He does, doesn't he?

Before Jeonghan can say anything else his phone vibrates in his pocket and he takes it out. The time reads eight-ten and the caller ID reads "Choi Jaesung" and even though eight a.m. isn't spectacularly early he never gets calls from Jaesung unless it's something serious. So a phone call at this time of day -

Someone must be dead. Or dying.

Heart pounding, avoiding Chan's curious eyes, he accepts the call.

"Hel - ?"

“Your father’s dead, Jeonghan.”

Seungcheol’s world feels like it might fall apart. Slowly but surely it will. Because there’s *no way* Jeonghan will think him innocent in all of this. And he’s been running it through his mind for the last half hour, after he got off the phone with Jaesung. Trying to make sense of why this happened. Talking it out with the corpse of Korea’s most dangerous gangster, willing him to provide answers Seungcheol knew he couldn't Thankfully his police brain kicked in after some time and he decided to search the room, looking for any signs of possible suicide or forced entry but found nothing. And further inspection of the body showed no wounds at all. Not even any bruises.

In short, with the exception of his recent sudden illness, Yoon Sanghoon was perfectly healthy and had no reason to die. Which leads Seungcheol to his current line of thinking: poison. He doesn’t know how or why but that’s where his mind goes next. It doesn’t make the most sense because if there’s anything in the house that was somehow compromised - well, Cheol would be just as sick as him too, if not also dead. He sits among the torn-apart cabinets, among a sea of sauces, cooking oils, herbs, and spices, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Waiting for Jaesung to arrive. Waiting for Jeonghan to torture him for information he doesn’t possess. Trying to think about if or when someone could’ve poisoned Yoon Sanghoon.

He’s still sitting like that when Jaesung shows up. Alone.

“I called Jeonghan and he’ll be here soo - “ He stops when he sees Seungcheol and internally, Cheol wonders how pathetic he looks. That morning’s galbitang sits cold and untouched on the stove and Cheol himself is ready to rip his hair from his scalp because nothing makes sense.

“I didn’t do it, *samchon,”* he says, glancing up at him from his spot on the floor. He hadn’t turned any lights on but the sunlight shining through the window is more than enough to show him the concern on Jaesung’s friendly face. “I swear to God I didn’t do it. I-I - I know we’ve been trying to take him down but I - I swear I had nothing to do with it.”

“I know you didn’t,” he says quietly, coming over to the sea of cooking shit. He reaches his hand out and Cheol takes it with his own trembling one. Immediately he’s pulled into a hug. “I believe you and so will Jeonghan.”

Jeonghan. “No he won’t. He - I wouldn’t,” he says around a dark, desperate laugh. “This looks bad, *samchon.* It looks really fucking bad and I - “

“Yah. Look at me.”

Seungcheol draws back and meets Jaesung’s gaze. His eyes are soft, much like his tone, and Cheol can’t help feeling better because Jaesung knows what he’s doing. He’s older, he’s experienced. Knows how to navigate this kind of shit. But he also can’t help the anxiety nagging at his mind, trying to lead him down dark *what-ifs* and the worst possible scenarios. “He won’t believe me, Jaesung. I - “

“You need to calm down.” His voice is firmer now, all business. “You can’t be this stressed out and anxious when Jeonghan gets here because he will know that something is up. Breathe, okay? Clean this up and I’ll - go check on Sanghoon.”

Check on what? he wants to say as he watches Jaesung head for the bedroom. *He’s dead.* But Seungcheol knows that, whatever Choi Jaesung is to the NIS, he’s Sanghoon’s best friend and right-hand man first and foremost. Christ, when Cheol had called him he hadn’t even been thinking of that. No, his thoughts had been about himself; what to do and how to get out of this situation. But Jaesung’s known Sanghoon longer than Cheol’s been alive. And Cheol knows that being an informant never changed their friendship. Never changed the love Jaesung holds for him.

It’s almost beautiful in a way, until Seungcheol remembers the things they’ve both done. He lets out a sigh as he starts reorganizing the cupboards, trying to focus on the task at hand and nothing else. Before he knows it his hands stop shaking and he can breathe a bit normally without his heart trying to burst its way through his chest.

And then the front door swings open.

“Where is he?” Yoon Jeonghan grinds out between gritted teeth - and then his eyes fall on Seungcheol.

He’s never wanted to cower more in his life. But he doesn’t. Instead he takes a deep breath, glances between the three others he’s brought with him - Mingyu, Joshua, and Wonwoo - and then closes the cupboard door.

“Your father?” he asks and decides not to wait for a response. “He’s in his bed. Jaesung’s with hi - “

“I meant *you.”*

Oh. Another breath works hard to calm his newly-pounding heart and steady his voice which threatens to crack. “Me?”

He takes a step forward, black boots sounding like thunder on the hardwood, a derisive scoff leaving his lips. “Don’t play dumb with me. What did you do to my father, Seungcheol?”

There’s not much standing between them right now - just a kitchen island and a few stools - and Seungcheol meets Jeonghan’s gaze. He looks like shit in the morning sunlight, dark circles under puffy eyes, unstyled hair, pretty lips twisted in a scowl, and Cheol wonders if he’s hiding a pistol underneath that black coat of his. “I didn’t do anything to him, Jeonghan, I swear - “

“You fucking - “ He cuts himself off as he pinches the bridge of his nose with two graceful, trembling fingers. “If it wasn’t you, then who was it? You’re here with him alone every day. You’ve been here only a few months with strong ties to the NIS and police university. The odds of you betraying us to take out my father are pretty damn good right now."

"But I didn't - "

"Do you at least understand *why* you’re the number one suspect right now?”

God this is exactly what he was afraid of and he prays to any deities listening that Jaesung will come out of the room right now. “Of course I do, but it wasn’t me. I had nothing to do with it. You - you have to believe me.”

Ignoring Jeonghan's scoff Seungcheol turns his attention to the other three. He'd consider them friends - Seungcheol the bodyguard's friends. Not Seungcheol the NIS agent's friends. Nonetheless they know him and they could defend his character, right? "Mingyu," he tries, and the look that crosses Jeonghan's face is deadly. *Shit.* "I wouldn't do this. You know that, don't you?"

The younger hesitates, jaw muscles twitching, and then he opens his mouth. "I-I'd like to *think* so but I don't… it looks really bad, Cheol-hyung."

Jeonghan raises a perfectly trimmed bow at this, like he's surprised at his informal tone, and then he sighs. A few more steps, Seungcheol feeling rooted to the spot, and they're mere inches apart. Again, somehow Jeonghan just towers over him and Cheol resists the urge to hide. Jeonghan smells like he spent the night soaking in soju, walks like his entire body is sore, and there's an exhaustion to his eyes that wasn't there yesterday; a small, tiny part of Seungcheol feels bad. Feels bad that he can't sleep while he's obviously hungover like this, feels bad that he's been out of prison for less than twenty-four hours and his father is dead. But then Jeonghan reaches into his coat and takes out a black - *switchblade?*

The blade opens with a sharp sound and for a moment Jeonghan just stares at it with those eyes of his, long, lithe fingers dancing over the steel unafraid of being hurt. And Cheol knows what he's doing. It's an intimidation tactic, whether he plans on using the knife on him or not. He tries to swallow his fear down, tries not to let it show. But his resolve is cracking because he's thoroughly and utterly exhausted and there's no light at the end of this long tunnel. No way out of this that Seungcheol can see.

"If it wasn't you," Jeonghan says again, voice low as he meets Seungcheol's eyes, "who was it?"

"I swear to God I don't know. If I did I would've gone after them myself. Since it's my fucking job."

He scoffs again and Cheol feels his warm breath on his face. "You expect me to believe that?"

“Jeonghan.”

Jaesung’s voice is as sharp as the knife Jeonghan holds and it forces his attention away from Seungcheol. He too braves a look at Jaesung and finds his uncle standing a few feet away, unshed tears in his eyes. Almost immediately Jeonghan closes the switchblade and makes his way over.

“He’s - he’s really dead?” he asks quietly, any tension gone from his body as he clasps a hand on Jaesung’s shoulder.

“I checked the body. There’s nothing - no stab wounds, no bullet holes.” He glances over Jeonghan’s head, at Seungcheol, and sighs. “I know he’s been feeling sick lately but - “

“Sick?” Joshua asks and honestly his presence is oddly comforting to Seungcheol because he knows him. Where Jeonghan is rough and apparently quick to anger, Joshua is a little more level-headed, a little more rational.

“Yeah,” Cheol responds before anyone else can. “Yeah, it started a few weeks ago. He threw up after lunch one day and ever since then he’s been getting weaker by the day. I-I think it’s poison.”

No one speaks and Seungcheol wonders if he’s said something wrong. If the others know something he doesn’t. And then Jeonghan turns from Jaesung with a sigh, looks at his friend. “You said yesterday that lately some of the men have been… less than happy with my father’s leadership. Who specifically?”

“Nam Kyuwon for one,” Wonwoo answers instead, pushing his glasses back up his nose with a finger. "I went on a drug run with him recently and he wouldn't shut up about it."

“He’s started bringing Sanghoon his lunches recently,” Seungcheol adds as that fact dawns on him. “You think he - “

“Find him,” Jeonghan says to the three, “and bring him to headquarters. He and I need to have a discussion.”

A weight the size of Korea itself seems to lift from Seungcheol's shoulders and he's able to take a breath. Now that Jeonghan has his man maybe that means he'll -

"As for you."

Shit.

Seungcheol takes a breath and meets Jeonghan's hard, dark gaze. "You have your new suspect," he says, trying to keep his voice cool and collected. But he doesn't like the way Jeonghan still grips that switchblade. Cheol can easily picture it slicing his own skin. Like a loaf of bread. "It wasn't me. How many times do I need to tell you?"

"I still don't trust you. Haven't since the moment I met you."

"Lay off him, Jeonghan."

Lips forming a straight line he glances behind him at a weary-looking Jaesung. "Why? Because your precious nephew hasn't betrayed people before?"

While technically true to the role he plays the sentence still strikes a chord with him and the urge to defend himself wins against the need to keep his mouth fucking shut. "Yah, I never betrayed any - "

"Is that right?" With that he whirls back on Seungcheol, fire in his eyes now. "Then what would *you* call deserting the NIS after two faithful years of service and a string of successful drug cases?" He closes the distance between them in a few strong, purposeful steps and the fact that he's obviously done his homework on Seungcheol, the way Cheol's done for him, sends a pang of fear straight to his already knotted stomach. The look twisting up Jeonghan's ethereally handsome face is nothing short of terrifying, a look Seungcheol wants to go the rest of his life without seeing again. And when he speaks his low voice is all venom. "You have enemies in this world of mine, Choi Seungcheol," he spits. "Don't make any more."

And before Cheol can really process it Jeonghan leaves the apartment, flanked by his friends, door slamming behind him.

Seungcheol slumps against the nearest counter, legs feeling like jelly, stress melting and giving way to dread and unease. "What am I supposed to do, *samchon?"* he asks, not even certain if Jaesung can give him any advice right now. "He still thinks I was involved. God, what am I - "

"It was Kyuwon."

His words, his tone are so confident, so firm, and Seungcheol looks at him because *what the fuck.* "How - how do you know that?"

Jaesung approaches him slowly, cautiously. "Because I asked him to. He doesn't know it's me that contacted him and thinks he was doing it for the good of the gang, not for the NIS - but your hypothesis is correct. He slowly poisoned Sanghoon in his lunches over the past few weeks."

Jesus Christ, this is all too much. His muddled brain isn't quite certain how to process that so he just frowns and latches onto the one part that doesn't quite make sense. "You - you asked him to kill your best friend?"

"I did." He sighs heavily and comes to lean against the counter too, right next to Seungcheol. Beside him Cheol feels so small and helpless, like a child. "For the same reason I became an informant a few years ago. Sanghoon's time is up. I have loved him for as long as I've known him but all of this has gotten out of hand and it's time for this kingdom of his to be dissolved."

This is still kind of too much information at once so again, Seungcheol's brain picks one thing to focus on. One thing to try and make sense of. "But won't Jeonghan take over now that he's gone?"

"He will, and that's our next step. Getting rid of him."

Which is most definitely easier said than done. "Okay, and how do we do that?"

“I need to think about it, consult with Byungchul. Jeonghan won’t be as easy to off as his father. He’s not as trusting, definitely smarter. So we need to be careful.” A warm, strong hand lands on Seungcheol’s shoulder and it’s almost comforting. “In the meantime, just stay the course and act as you have been. He’ll come to trust you and we’ll use that to our advantage.”

Seungcheol doesn’t believe that in the slightest. There’s literally not a single thing about Jeonghan that makes Cheol think they’ll ever be anything but antagonistic. *To be fair,* his mind tries, *you said the same thing about Sanghoon and the others when you started this. You even thought that about Jaesung and now look at you two.*

His thoughts have a point but he’s still not sure. So he gives Jaesung a smile he knows is tired and just stands there while his uncle calls those necessary to collect Sanghoon’s body.

Today is gonna be a long day.

When Seungcheol finally makes it to HQ maybe an hour later he heads to the basement at Mingyu’s insistence. The younger man had sent him a short series of text messages and Cheol’s blood had run cold the moment he read the word “basement”. He knows what happens down here, knows why he’s been summoned here the moment he opens the heavy, sound-proof door.

Jeonghan is here, along with his friends - all standing around a trembling, sweating Nam Kyuwon who’s bound to a chair. His face is bloodied and swollen, pairing nicely with the bloodied, swollen knuckles on Jeonghan’s right hand, and not for the first time in the last day, Jeonghan resembles his late father so much it’s uncanny. He’s all icy cruelty dressed head to toe in black, running a long, thin finger along the sleek edge of his switchblade - the same one he tried to threaten Seungcheol with. Playing with it right where his victim can see it; he’s coolly indifferent to the whimpers muffled by the man’s gag, glancing up at him with dark eyes, bow-shaped lips quirked up in a smirk.

If Jeonghan notices Seungcheol is here he pays him no mind. No, his whole focus is on Nam Kyuwon.

The room is deathly still as he continues teasing his prey; none of the other members gathered dare move a single muscle. Not even Mingyu who usually can't seem to stand a single second of silence. Not even Seungkwan with his unending stories. No, everyone waits with bated breath. Waits for Yoon Jeonghan to speak.

When he finally does, it's with that low tone of his, the one that lulls you into a false sense of security, and Seungcheol wonders if he does it on purpose.

"You killed my father," Jeonghan says, sparing his victim a simple look.

Kyuwon whimpers again, squirming against his bonds.

Jeonghan shushes him by raising his pointer finger to his mouth and the man immediately stills. "You killed my father," he says again, "but there's no way you did it by yourself. When I take out your gag you *will* tell me who you worked with." He leans in the slightest bit to ghost the tip of the knife along Kyuwon's already bloody cheek; he promptly squeezes his eyes shut. "Or I'll force it out of you. Am I understood?"

Luckily for him the man nods and Jeonghan tugs the fabric gag from his mouth. It hangs loosely around his throat and for a moment he's silent, staring at Jeonghan with wide eyes.

"I - I'm sorry," he starts, and Jeonghan sighs.

"I already told you what I want to hear, Kyuwon, and it's not that." Raising a perfectly groomed brow, he continues, "Think my father would want to hear apologies? You *poisoned* him and thought you would get away with it?"

"Th - they forced m-me to!" His voice wavers in fear, sweat breaking out on his temples. "I didn't - they *made* me!"

"Who made you?" Jeonghan asks evenly, lightly dragging the knife along Kyuwon's forearm.

Seungcheol's stomach starts to churn, flipping over on itself over and over again. He glances at the others in the room; skinny Minghao, who apparently has taught Jeonghan all he knows in the art of assassination and murder, despite Jeonghan being the elder; tall, devastatingly handsome Junhui, master torturer with a face of ice as he watches Jeonghan and Kyuwon; Wonwoo with his glacially stony features, waiting for the information Kyuwon will no doubt relinquish. They and the others stand so still, faces so… indifferent, and Seungcheol *still* isn't used to the atmosphere that surrounds gang life.

He's not sure he ever will be.

Kyuwon takes a shuddering breath, dragging Seungcheol's attention back to him. "I - I don't know," he whispers.

Jeonghan looks unimpressed, raising another perfect brow, and sighs. "I see." He glances in Seungcheol's direction - and for a moment their eyes lock. It's the first time he's addressed Cheol's presence since he entered the basement and his heart immediately leaps into his throat. But he's ready to defend himself, if he has to, Jaesung's words ringing in his head. And there's something deep in Jeonghan's gaze, something Seungcheol can't quite place. Exhaustion? No, maybe boredom? Before he can figure it out though Jeonghan looks beside him at Junhui, calls him by name, and the man steps forward.

Cheol's heart slows a little bit at being looked over.

"Need some help, sir?" Junhui asks, and his soft, melodic voice breaks some of the tension in the room. As he wants it to, Seungcheol realizes; he's seen this act a few times before with Jeonghan's father and he knows whatever awaits Kyuwon - it won't be fun.

"What's the easiest way to break a finger?" Jeonghan asks, eyes back on his victim. "I can't seem to remember."

The man's face whitens even more as a smirk crosses Junhui's lips. "Want me to walk you through it?"

"Sure."

God.

“Okay so grab the finger and jerk it up out of the socket.”

“Like this?” Jeonghan asks above Kyuwon’s groan, the one he muffles behind a bitten lip just in time.

Junhui nods. “Now you’re gonna push it back down as hard as you can.”

The unmistakable *crack* of Kyuwon’s finger bones comes first, followed by a choked-back scream, and a triumphant, “I did it!”

Seungcheol would rather be anywhere but here, stomach threatening to void all of its contents out his mouth. Swallowing, he tries to defocus. Locks his eyes on the crack in the wall behind Joshua, opposite him, as Junhui returns to his spot. He vaguely hears Jeonghan say something to Kyuwon who responds in a pained sob. Something about being blackmailed into it. Something else about his unknown extortionist setting him up with -

“Song Yooseok?” Jeonghan repeats and *that* catches Seungcheol’s attention. Catches everyone’s attention, by the way shoulders stiffen and eyes land on Kyuwon across the room. “Mine and my father’s direct rival, Song Yooseok?”

Kyuwon nods quickly and Seungcheol tries to ignore the different shades of purple his finger is turning because this just got more interesting. No way in hell did he think Song Yooseok would be involved, and Jaesung hadn’t said anything about that. “He - he gave me the poison I used and - and…”

“And what?” Jeonghan asks, desperation seeping into his voice. He’s close; *they’re* close to hearing what they need, but Jeonghan is obviously not patient. Far from it, really. But how could he be? He’s grown up fighting, been trained to kill; not take someone’s defenses down broken bone by broken bone until they crack completely. Huffing a sigh he reaches for another of Kyuwon’s fingers, knife seemingly abandoned on the floor - and this time he does it without instruction.

Kyuwon screams again, piercing the tension in the room, and Seungcheol resists the urge to turn away.

“And what?” Jeonghan asks again, voice hard behind gritted teeth. “I’m running out of patience and if you don’t talk now I’ll let Junhui take over.”

Those words would be enough to scare anyone into talking if they’d heard even the rumors of Junhui’s… talents, and Kyuwon speaks through his sobs. “They - they’re coming after *you* n-next. With you g-gone - “

“They get Seoul,” Jeonghan finishes grimly.

Maybe it is *part of Jaesung’s plan. Make Jeonghan’s death look like it’s happened at the hands of a rival gang.*

Silently Jeonghan stands and tugs something out from behind him, pulls it from underneath his black coat.

By the time Seungcheol realizes it’s a pistol, Kyuwon’s brains and blood paint the back wall, after a resounding, sharp *bang!*

Just as quickly as he’d taken it out, Jeonghan slips the gun back in his belt and turns away from his victim. In the ringing silence, Seungcheol worries he’ll be able to hear the pounding of his own heart; that the gasps he’s working so hard to calm might give him away. But Jeonghan doesn’t look at him. Doesn’t look at anyone, in fact. His eyes are closed, shoulders - trembling? He stuffs his hands in his coat pockets but Seungcheol would bet his life that they’re shaking.

Shaking.

Huh.

“Meeting room in ten,” and with that he hauls open the heavy, sound-proof door and leaves.

Everyone knows their roles. Vernon helps Minghao with the body, unblinking as they remove his bindings, as if there isn’t a gaping hole where his head should be. Wonwoo pauses the recording on his phone and after the

meeting he'll retreat to his room of computers and hack his way through the information Kyuwon gave them. Seungkwan and Mingyu begin the lengthy task of cleaning up Jeonghan's mess, the former grumbling something along the lines of laying down newspaper before they let their new leader torture anyone.

Everyone knows their roles. Except Seungcheol.

He stands in his corner, stomach churning, tremors in his hands, wondering if he still fits in here. He's all but certain Jeonghan won't keep him on as his personal bodyguard. Not since he still seems to think he was involved in his father's death.

Why else would he have wanted me to watch him torture Kyuwon? He's trying to send me a message.

Seungcheol's stomach tightens into knots and he can't *be* here anymore; not with the metallic tang of blood choking the stale air, not with the others sending him increasingly curious looks. Not with the sound of Kyuwon screaming still in his ears, ingrained in his brain.

Trembling hands fumble with the latch on the door and he hardly allows himself to breathe in the cool, ventilated air that greets him before he takes off. The nearest bathroom is maybe a few steps down the hall from the basement staircase and that's where Seungcheol ends up, throwing open a stall door and kneeling in front of the toilet just before his empty stomach heaves.

He vomits its contents - or lack thereof, as opaque stomach acids meet his gaze - into the toilet until there's nothing left. Until his insides stop churning and knotting. Then he lifts a heavy hand to flush, and he sits there (grateful that Mingyu would rather die than let the bathrooms sit in filth) for about ten seconds before he realizes he's not alone.

A glance to his right shows thin legs wrapped in a familiar pair of black pants, in a similar position as Seungcheol: knelt before a toilet. His mind not so helpfully thinks it's Jeonghan but Seungcheol quickly shuts that down because what sort of gang boss's son - gang boss himself now - would need

to vomit after maybe ten minutes of torture? With a heavy sigh Seungcheol forces himself up from Mingyu's pristine floor and moves to one of the sinks to wash out his mouth. His throat burns and he could really go for a nice ice-cold glass of water right now.

Or vodka.

On instinct he checks his reflection in the mirror and then quickly glances away before he can catch sight of his too-pale face, the too-dark bags under his eyes, too-gaunt cheeks. He knows he looks like shit but after everything that's happened this morning he doesn't want the reminder. After splashing some water on his face he's about to leave when the other stall door opens, and something inside Seungcheol urges him to comfort whoever this is. The odds of the mystery vomit-er being Jeonghan are fairly decent, and the odds of them being a killer are undeniable yet he wants to know they're okay. Wants to know who else in this gang could have a weak stomach like him.

"Uh, hey," he asks the open air, after the stall's occupant has yet to come out. It might be Jeonghan, might not be him and Cheol's hands shake a bit at the thought of actually being alone with him after this morning. "Are - are you okay?"

There's a huff and then a black-clad figure walks out, rubbing a hand down his face. It's definitely Jeonghan and Seungcheol has the overwhelming urge to walk out and never look him in the eye again. But he doesn't. Can't seem to move a muscle, really, with the way their gazes meet. There's that exhaustion from before, buried deep in Jeonghan's brown eyes, like it's not supposed to be there. Or he doesn't want it there. And for a moment neither of them speaks. They just look at each other and Seungcheol notices the dark circles under his eyes, the ones he's tried to hide with concealer. He notices the acne gathering at the juncture of his jaw, the shadow along his cheekbones in this lighting. He truly looks *exhausted* and Seungcheol doesn't blame him. Not with everything that's happened in the last few hours.

And then he speaks. His voice is low as always, yet it cracks a bit on the first few syllables. "You don't really care, do you?" With a sigh he moves towards a sink and does the same as Seungcheol and rinses out his mouth.

“You threw up?” he asks without thinking, and then immediately regrets it.

The quick, merciless way he just killed Kyuwon flashes before Cheol’s eyes.

There’s a moment of silence. “I did,” Jeonghan responds as he pats his chin clean with a paper towel. With a sideways glance he meets Seungcheol’s gaze again before looking back in the mirror. Lithe fingers smooth his short black hair back from his eyes, pinch at his sharp cheekbones, sweep over the circles under his eyes. And then he steps back from the mirror. He doesn’t say anything about *why* he vomited after torturing a guy, nor does he ask why Seungcheol did the same. He simply walks by Seungcheol with another sigh and reminds him of “the meeting in a few, Choi.”

And with that he’s gone again.

It takes Seungcheol a moment to catch his breath.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you for reading! hope you enjoyed! <3

Chapter 3

three: heavy lies the crown

The set-up of Sanghoon's - rather Jeonghan's - gang isn't anything quite like Seungcheol has ever seen before. Not that he's necessarily an *expert* on gang activity in Korea but after four years of studying at the Seoul National Police University and two more years working drug-related cases at the NIS, he figures he knows a thing or two about the underworld and how it works. Suffice it to say, he's not used to the way things are done here. The main difference with Sanghoon's gang versus others: there's an obvious generation gap between his men and Jeonghan's men. Most of Sanghoon's are like him: in their fifties, from modest backgrounds that gave them reasons to join a gang some thirty-odd years ago. They tend to be conservative and self-righteous, thinking that every word out of their mouths is the be all, end all.

So it can't sit right with them when Jeonghan essentially strips them all of their power and positions to install his own men there. Where they were apprentices and seconds-in-command, now they are directors and leaders themselves. In a similar way, Jeonghan's inner circle, all ten of them, are a lot like him as well: young, either the son of a gangster or the product of the streets that made him, or both. Existing with somehow everything *and* nothing to lose. It's a dangerous combination, one that could either lead the organization to great heights or a fiery end. If they'd be allowed to make it that far, that is. The leadership change must've happened right after Sanghoon died too, since all but one of the familiar wrinkled faces sit in the meeting room with him and Jeonghan. That one would be Jaesung and he's only here because of his relationship with Jeonghan, Cheol figures. But the others? They're all here because Jeonghan trusts them with his life, even after the distance three years in prison must bring.

Not for the first time that day, Seungcheol has no idea why he's here as well.

They gather in the meeting room on the top floor, and thirteen of them settle around the long table, Jeonghan at the head. Next to him on one side is Joshua, and Cheol can easily see him taking the coveted spot of Jeonghan's

right-hand man, his second in command. As well-suited as someone like Jaesung would be - well in his own words, his time is up. He's old, part of the dying generation that was forced from their seats, and if Jeonghan plans on expanding his new gang, getting them into ventures long thought useless by their elders he'll need someone like Joshua Hong by his side.

Which means Seungcheol will probably end up having to go through Joshua to get to Jeonghan, when it comes down to it. And that's not something he's overly thrilled with, since Joshua is a lot like his leader: pretty, easily underestimated, and deadly intelligent. Or so his dossier says and Seungcheol would tend to agree with it, knowing what he does about the man. He wears a cool, collected smirk as he waits for Jeonghan to address them, the smirk of a man who's more than self-assured. He knows his place in this organization, knows his place with Jeonghan.

Once again, Cheol is at a loss as to his own.

On Jeonghan's other side sits Jaesung. He's quiet too, staring at the wood tabletop with sad, unfocused eyes and Seungcheol actually feels for his uncle. At this point Sanghoon's been dead for a few hours but Cheol's not sure how much time Jaesung's had to process it. Actually, he's not sure how much time *any* of them have had to process it. Because as bloodthirsty and cold as Sanghoon tended to be he was like a father figure to these young men, a brother to Jaesung. They all sit relatively quietly around the long table, which is a little bit more than unnerving since generally this group has no issues being chaotic and loud. It was something Sanghoon would allow at meetings, until he was ready to talk at which point everyone would fall into silence.

Right now they're already there, nervous eyes flicking to Jeonghan every few seconds. If he notices he says nothing, just examines his hands on the dark wooden surface. Picks at a hangnail and winces when it only grows. One of Jaesung's hands finds its way to Jeonghan's shoulder and he offers it a friendly squeeze. The young man's pretty lips turn up into the gentlest of smiles and it's then, in that moment, that Seungcheol remembers that Jeonghan is only twenty-six. Like him. That he's far too young to be thrust into all the power he has now. He's the king of Seoul's - hell, the entirety of Korea's -

underground. He all but runs the country now, through the nefarious means his father secured in his own tenure.

There's a reason why the president of Korea is required to be at least forty years old and Seungcheol worries Jeonghan's not ready.

And then he's not certain why he's even worrying.

Why it matters to him.

"My father's dead," Jeonghan says quietly yet it sounds like a scream in the silence. He doesn't meet anyone's eyes, keeping his own on his hands. "And it was an inside job, done with Song Yooseok."

The others, with the exception of Jaesung, had all been in the room when he'd tortured this out of Kyuwon, yet some of them tense as if it's just settling in. And Cheol has to give kudos to Jaesung's acting abilities because if the alliance with Song Yooseok really was his doing there's no one in their right mind who would think it was. He frowns deeply as he looks up to meet Jeonghan's gaze, nothing but shock and grief in his wide eyes. His grip on the young man's shoulder tightens before he removes it entirely, fist coming down on the laminated wood with a resounding *crack.* Seungcheol doesn't wince. Refuses to.

"So-Song Yooseok?" Jaesung demands, voice trembling. He has the kind of voice that Seungcheol likes. Soft-spoken. He's never heard the man yell, never really heard him swear. Really, he truly seems more like an actual uncle than a gangster. But now… now he just sounds scared. Worried. The way Yoon Sanghoon's best friend and right-hand man would in this situation. "That bastard helped kill my best friend?"

Jeonghan nods quietly. "Along with the help of Nam Kyuwon, one of our drug runners." A quiet sigh escapes his lips as he runs a hand down his face and Seungcheol wonders how much sleep he's on, if he's still feeling hungover. And then he silently chastises himself because *it doesn't matter. He's a killer and a gangster and you're not gonna start feeling sympathy for him now. Not when he probably hates you.*

“You should rest, Jeonghan,” Joshua says quietly. “You’ve - you’ve done a lot today.”

He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even really react for a few moments. Beside him, Jaesung’s fist still rests clenched and white-knuckled on the table and Seungcheol reaches out to place his own hand on it, ever the good nephew. Jaesung meets his gaze and relaxes with a long, deep sigh. And the look they share goes beyond the surface. Something in Jaesung’s eyes says “good job” and Seungcheol just gives his hand a squeeze before removing his own.

And just like yesterday, Jeonghan’s gaze follows his every movement. But this time when their eyes meet there’s no flirty smile, no bizarrely playful undertones. He’s all stoic business and looks away from Cheol with a heavy sigh.

“I don’t know who I can trust anymore.”

The words fall like a rainy drizzle from Jeonghan’s mouth; quiet and slow yet more than they seem at first. And Seungcheol knows what a blow that is to a gang leader. Has seen it plenty of times in his short years with the NIS. If Jeonghan doesn’t change things, shake up his men and his leadership the way he apparently already has, he stands to lose the kingdom he’s inherited. Which is exactly what the NIS wants, Cheol knows. Because even though they refuse to keep him in the loop the next step must involve relieving Jeonghan of his leadership. Either through the dissolution of his gang or more… fatal means.

No one speaks at his confession though, and a part of Seungcheol again wonders why he’s here for this. Is he part of this inner circle that Jeonghan thinks he can trust? Or is he here for show? Is he about to meet his end here, on the top-most floor, where anyone could hear that lethal gunshot? Nothing in Jeonghan’s gaze gives him any sort of concrete answer and Seungcheol *hates* it.

“We can up surveillance of the members,” Wonwoo says and immediately Cheol’s heart begins to pound.

But then Jeonghan shakes his head and relief washes over Seungcheol like a wave. “I don’t like doing that. I already don’t like that my father’s asked you to keep tabs on certain members. It feels… wrong. I mean, if you can’t trust someone why would you keep them around?”

The quick, pointed glance he gives Seungcheol feels like a death sentence and he wants to *leave.* Can’t stand the tension settling in the air, can’t stand the looks from the others at their leader’s obvious dig in his direction. Can’t stand Jeonghan’s attitude. Gang leader or not.

“What’s your problem with me, Jeonghan?” he asks before his brain can tell him not to, looking up to meet sad, dark eyes. Beside him Jaesung doesn't move a muscle. “I thought we made it clear that I’m not involved in your father’s death in any way, shape, or form.” *Which technically is not a lie.*

“Sure,” he says, dragging the word out, “but that still doesn’t mean that I trust you. I have no reason to. What, just because you’re Jaesung’s nephew I’m supposed to allow you to stay? You know, in all the years I’ve known him he’s never once mentioned you.”

Some sick, morbid pride surges through his body at Jeonghan’s words. He knows they’re designed to hurt, designed to tear at the relationship between uncle and nephew but apparently Jeonghan doesn’t know him as well as he thinks he does because said relationship doesn’t really exist. Seungcheol would never go to Jaesung for anything other than advice on the case. Would never act affectionate if the others weren’t around to see it. But he fights back his smirk. “That’s funny. He never mentioned you to me either.”

“I see.”

“If you don’t trust me as much as you say you do, then why am I here? Why did you let me sit in on this meeting when I could easily relay the information back to the nonexistent superiors you think I have?”

A dangerous smirk crosses his lips and Seungcheol already knows that he’s lost this round. *Damn it.* “You caught me, Choi. Look at you, outsmarting Korea’s most powerful gang boss.” And as quickly as it came the smirk is gone, replaced by a dark look. Much like the one he gave him this morning,

in Sanghoon's kitchen. Cheol fights back the urge to shiver, forcing himself to keep Jeonghan's gaze. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? If you're here and you hear everything I say to my members - well, I'll know who to blame if there's a leak. And now that you know this, you won't be *able* to communicate with your… nonexistent superiors because if you do and they act on it I'll know it was you. See how that works?"

Of course he does, because Jeonghan is smart. Sanghoon would have either barred Cheol from the meeting or simply killed him by now. But Jeonghan wants to play games with him. Wants him to know that there's nothing he can do about his situation. God in the few hours he's spent with him Cheol's quickly learning just how intelligent and scary Yoon Jeonghan really is. He's quickly learning that he's not at all equipped to deal with him and that the NIS should've put a more experienced agent in his stead. "I'm not a fucking rat," he spits, ignoring the looks from the others. Jaesung still hasn't really moved, just sits quietly, and Cheol's not sure if that's a good thing or not.

Something in Jeonghan's brown eyes glints and yeah, this is definitely a game to him. "Is that right? Prove it, then. Prove your loyalty to me."

"Since you're so goddamn smart, tell me how it is I'm supposed to do that."

He shrugs a bit, tapping a few delicate fingers on the tabletop. "If you're truly loyal, you'll figure it out won't you?"

The desire to reach out and grab him by the throat rises by the second and Seungcheol's already so tired of this shit. This job was supposed to be easy; he was just supposed to sit at the sidelines and gather information for the NIS. But somewhere down the line he'd been fucked over by his own superiors - his own uncle - and now the man he was gathering information on was dead and nothing Seungcheol said or did could bring Jeonghan to trust him, it seemed. And if he lost the leader's trust it wouldn't be long before he lost everyone else's trust. And then his life.

"So that's your plan?" he asks of Jeonghan, who just sits there with that stupid smirk. "Keep me around to see if I snitch?"

"Yes. Or as bullet fodder. We *are* going to war, after all."

“We are, sir?” Vernon pipes up, and it’s like Jeonghan remembers he has an entire gang to lead, that his sole purpose in life *isn’t* to bully Seungcheol; the smirk leaves his face and he addresses his quiet, despondent men with a soft look.

“We are. We can’t let Song Yooseok get away with this; can’t let him think he can just kill my father like that.” Turning to Wonwoo he says, “Find out what you can with the information Kyuwon gave us - how much of Song’s men were involved, his own level of involvement as well. See if the info we already have on them needs to be updated or not.”

The commands continue and Cheol carefully notes them down in his head. Joshua is to do a recon of their status and supplies and is given permission to strike up deals with allies to procure anything they need - especially medical supplies for Seungkwan. Mingyu’s job is to increase security around HQ and Jeonghan’s apartment; to make sure at least two men are with Chan at all times and that no one leaves HQ without him knowing about it. Minghao, Junhui, Soonyoung - the best assassins they have - are to work with the others and make sure everyone’s fighting skills are up to par. Seokmin is told to work intelligence with Wonwoo and Vernon and Jihoon are just supposed to hang tight and continue business as usual for now. Can’t alert Song Yooseok to their plans.

“Samchon, go home and rest,” Jeonghan says after everything. It’s just them and Seungcheol in the room now, since the rest have their responsibilities, and Jaesung sighs heavily.

“Really, I’m fine Han.”

“No you’re not. I know how much he meant to you. So please, rest. I’ll keep in touch.”

Seungcheol watches Jeonghan for any sign of insincerity but as far as he can tell Jeonghan means it. His sad eyes meet Jaesung’s like they’re the only two people in the world - and Seungcheol doesn’t want Jaesung to go. Doesn’t want to be alone with Jeonghan because he can’t trust him the same way Jeonghan doesn’t trust him.

Isn't that funny?

But at Jeonghan's insistence Jaesung does leave, offering Cheol a soft smile on his way out. The moment the door closes behind him the meeting room settles into tense, heavy silence and Cheol wants nothing more than for Jeonghan to say something else bratty and threatening so that maybe he'd have an excuse to duke it out with him. As bad an idea as that is.

"I need to keep you where I can see you," Jeonghan says without preamble, not even deigning to look at Seungcheol as he examines his closely trimmed fingernails instead. "So you'll be continuing your position as leader's bodyguard."

Cheol wants to laugh; so he does. It comes out dark and wry and grabs Jeonghan's attention. Brown eyes flick up to his. "Do you really think that's smart? What if I am what you think I am? Won't having me in a position where it'd be easier to hurt you be a big mistake?"

"You think I'd let you get so close?" He smirks as he rises from his chair. "You wanted a chance to prove your loyalty, Choi; here it is. What better way to show allegiance than to take a bullet for the gang's leader?" He slowly makes his way towards Seungcheol and he watches Jeonghan's every graceful movement. "There's an empty room at my apartment; I expect you there by the end of the day." He closes the distance between them in a few steps as he stops behind Seungcheol's chair.

Every single hair on the back of Cheol's neck stands up as he feels warm breath against his neck, a pair of lips brushing his ear, and he's paralyzed. "Let me make something clear to you, Seungcheol," Jeonghan whispers and it sends an involuntary shiver down Cheol's spine, for reasons he can't quite decipher. "The moment you step out of line - the moment you show me that you absolutely, definitively cannot be trusted I will not hesitate to kill you. If any of my plans make it to the NIS and I find out, I'll slit your throat and leave your head on their doorstep in Naegok. No hesitation. Am I understood?"

Seungcheol knows what he needs to do. He's been running his mouth all day, digging a deeper hole for himself when he should've spent this entire time

sucking up to Jeonghan. So he swallows his pride and mutters a “yes”.

Jeonghan chuckles softly but there’s no humor in it and his breath tickles Seungcheol’s neck. “Yes what?”

This fucking - “Yes sir,” he grunts.

“Good job, Seungcheol. Was that so hard?”

Cheol resists the urge to turn around and deck him right in his pretty face, instead sitting quietly as he watches Jeonghan head toward the door.

When he finally leaves only then does Seungcheol allow himself to breathe.

Which is happening far too often lately.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you for reading!! <3

Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you guys so much for your kudos and kind words and love for this fic! with everything going on right now it's been incredibly nice to read your comments and know that people are enjoying this, so thank you all so much!

also if anyone's interested i'm writing with this han in mind, just with slightly shorter hair, and this cheol uwu

there are brief mentions of suicide and drug use and overdoses at the beginning of this chapter!

enjoy, and thank you for reading!

four: falling down down

After calming himself down from his impending panic attack and resigning himself to his fate as Jeonghan's bodyguard, Seungcheol heads back to Sanghoon's place to grab what he owns. Everything he brought to this life fits in a few small boxes and the Maserati's trunk, and the entire ordeal takes maybe thirty minutes and a few carefully placed sympathetic looks at the men cleaning out the penthouse. He's not sure if it'll stay in the gang, if Jeonghan will want to hang onto it, but Cheol figures it doesn't really matter. He never liked it there anyway and maybe if he's lucky, Jeonghan won't force him to make galbitang every morning.

Maybe that's how I'll prove my loyalty.

He chuckles to himself at the morbid thought as he starts up the car again - and then he sighs because this is what his life is now. And the way he's coping? Humor.

"Could be worse," he mutters to himself. "I could dig into the stash of coke in the basement or become an alcoholic or take up smoking." Each of those

ideas sound relatively fun, but Seungcheol read the statistics before he accepted this job. He knows how many undercover agents end up addicted to something by the time they finish - *if* they get to finish. He knows how many undercover agents end up overdosing or jumping off the twenty-fifth floor or sticking the muzzle of their NIS-issued pistol in their mouths. He knows how many of them don't survive, period - through suicide, accidental or otherwise, *or* murder.

And those reminders put an immediate damper on his mood as he fights traffic over Dongho Bridge. Jeonghan's apartment is maybe twenty minutes from Sanghoon's (if traffic is good), in the heart of Gangnam because of course it is. Because Jeonghan is young and not only inherited his father's trillions of won a few hours ago but he's been making his own cut for years now. So he's got the money to flaunt.

Maybe five minutes into the drive Seungcheol's phone rings through the Maserati's Bluetooth and he hits "accept" when he reads the caller ID.

"Are you okay, Choi?" Kim Byungchul asks and Seungcheol simultaneously wants to fight and hug his section chief.

"I texted you yesterday morning and you're just calling now?" he asks.

"Sorry, kid. I've been busy."

"Busy," Cheol scoffs, now wanting to fight him more than hug him. "Did Jaesung tell you what he had planned?" There's silence on the other line for a few moments - but that's telling in and of itself. So before Kim can get a word in Cheol continues, anger racing to his lips before his brain can stop it. Which seems to be happening more and more often lately. "When were you two gonna tell me? I could've prepared, maybe created a solid alibi so that Yoon Jeonghan wouldn't think I killed his father!"

"But you didn't, so what's the problem?"

Seungcheol *really* wants to punch something but he can't so he settles for hitting the steering wheel instead. Even though Byungchul can't see it. "'What's the problem'? The problem, *gwajangnim,* is that because I found

Yoon's body Jeonghan now thinks I'm involved. And because I came straight to the gang from the NIS he thinks I could be a rat. Nothing I do seems to convince him otherwise and he's already threatened my life a number of times. He thinks that - that my being Jaesung's nephew isn't reason enough to trust me, even though it was enough for Sanghoon and everyone else. And I don't know what to do that won't result in dying."

Kim's quiet again and in front of Seungcheol is nothing but red brake lights, bright against the overcast sky. Sometime between finding Sanghoon, watching Jeonghan torture Kyuwon, and the meeting clouds had found their way in. As if the situation wasn't already foreboding enough. It's infuriating and he hates the crackle of Byungchul's sigh through the car speakers. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you, Choi, but we couldn't risk Jeonghan finding out you knew about the plan. It - "

"Bullshit!" Seungcheol snaps, unable to help himself. "He thinks I was involved anyway. And now I need to know how to handle this situation."

"Yah, don't take that tone with me, kid. I get that you're stressed but I'm still your superior. Got it?"

Like it always does when he's stressed or upset, Byungchul's familiar Daegu dialect slips out. One that reminds Seungcheol of his childhood, of angry fathers and arguing parents. Maybe an hour ago he was kowtowing to Jeonghan and here he is again, kowtowing to someone else. Cheol heaves a sigh around a "yes, *gwajangnim"* and goes silent, waiting for Kim to say something.

"It'll be over soon," he tells Cheol eventually. "According to Jaesung's report, Jeonghan's already doing what we want him to do: waging war on Song Yooseok."

So that *was* Jaesung's idea. Or the NIS's.

"He'll die in the impending battle and then Jaesung will step in and do what needs to be done to dissolve the gang and punish those who deserve it. And then you can come home. So please just stick with it for now, Seungcheol."

Cheol fights back a scoff; Kim using his given name and not his family name usually means he's trying to be comforting. *Trying* being the operative word there. "How can you be certain he'll die?"

"Either you or Jaesung will pull the trigger. It's the only way we can be certain."

"Good," Seungcheol says, not trusting anyone else to take care of it. Especially not Song Yooseok and any of his men. There's a reason why they've fought tooth and nail for years only to still be the number two gang in Seoul. "You're certain it'll all be over then?"

"Yes, Seungcheol. I promise. You'll come home - "

"With a raise?"

Byungchul sighs heavily and Seungcheol can picture him pinching the bridge of his nose. Good. Cheol hopes the bastard has a headache. He deserves it after all this back and forth, keeping important shit from him. "Yes fine with a raise. Just stay the course and don't do anything stupid. Grovel and do your damnedest to get on Jeonghan's good side."

"As long as you promise not to keep me in the dark any longer."

"You're sure making a lot of demands today, kid. Fine. I'll update you when I can."

That's as good as it'll get, Seungcheol decides, and after exchanging goodbyes he ends the call. The desire to shoot something is stronger than it's been in awhile and maybe tomorrow Cheol can spend some time in the basement shooting range. Or maybe he can spar with Mingyu because apparently he's a masochist. Actually that might be a good idea; hone his skills before the war with the Songs. Make sure he's ready to take Yoon Jeonghan down.

By the time he reaches the top floor apartment, Cheol's *already* ready to take Yoon Jeonghan down, balancing his three boxes as best he can and still be able to see over them. What is it with Yoon men and living on precariously placed floors with long elevator rides? It must run in the family, Cheol decides as he punches in the code given to him. What's wrong with a nice little home in the suburbs? Why does everything have to be about wealth and status? Especially here in the city where traffic is so bad.

Heaving a sigh Seungcheol manages to close the front door behind him. He turns around and gives himself a moment to take stock of his new home. It's not as obscenely expensive as Sanghoon's – actually despite the view through the ceiling-to-floor windows on one side, it doesn't really feel like a pricey, Gangnam apartment. Because it's not decorated like one.

Sure the furniture looks sleek and everything matches an obviously specific color palette and aesthetic but it's a lot homier than Sanghoon's. There's clutter around the apartment – textbooks on the coffee table, sweaters draped over chairs, mounds of fuzzy throw blankets on the two couches. And there are pictures framed and hung on the wall. Cheol sets his boxes down as his curiosity gets the better of him and he goes to check them out. There are a number of photos of a beautiful, dark-haired woman and two young boys – both of whom are very familiar. One wears a happy smile Cheol knows well and the other looks at the camera with those sad eyes.

If he had to guess, Seungcheol would say Jeonghan looks to be about ten or eleven in this one. Whatever's going on he doesn't look thrilled and it kind of rubs Cheol a weird way knowing that he's been making these same sad faces for at least ten years. Chan, on the other hand, is smiling wide as usual and then the woman standing between them, Christ she looks just like Jeonghan. The same soft eyes, the same bow-lips, the same slender nose. She's absolutely beautiful – and a complete stranger to Seungcheol. He's never seen her before, never met her. Doesn't even know what her name might be. She's most likely the boys' mother but Cheol doesn't really have much to confirm that.

Maybe someday he'll be able to ask about her.

The rest of the pictures on the wall consist of Jeonghan, and usually Chan, with his circle of friends. It looks like what might be on a college student's camera roll: "ugly" selfies, friends passed out on the couch, aesthetic sunset shots with graceful silhouettes. They're lovely in a way, really, and Cheol kind of realizes that this isn't just a job to Jeonghan. This is his *life*. These people are his life.

"Cheol-hyung!"

Ah. Pulled out of his reverie, Seungcheol grins to himself. He'd know that voice anywhere and he barely has time to turn around before he's jumped by a short, overexcited college student who's stronger than he looks. Chan knocks the wind from his body but Seungcheol holds him as tightly as Chan holds him. If there's a Yoon Seungcheol would ever like it'd be Chan. Without a doubt. He's nothing like his father or older brother - minus the smarts. He definitely has Jeonghan's intelligence but lucky for him he gets to put them towards a medical degree. Which is probably why he's Seungcheol's favorite Yoon. There's nothing about him that's cryptic or violent and it's a welcome change.

"Hyung texted me and said you'd be moving in with us," he chirps, pulling away from the hug with bright eyes, "and I'm so excited!"

Cheol can't resist the urge to ruffle the kid's hair and Chan grins up at him. "That's good, Channie. I'm glad you're excited." A second, more focused look at the young man shows Seungcheol dark circles under his eyes and a tiredness in his posture. One he's not used to seeing.

And then his heart breaks for Chan as he remembers the events of that day.

"Hey, I'm sorry about - about your father," Seungcheol murmurs.

The young man is quiet for a few moments, eyes on the hardwood floor, and then he sighs. "It's… it's okay, Cheol-hyung, but thank you. *Abeoji* and I were never really close, even though he liked to think we were." When he lifts his head a wry smile plays at his lips and it looks so out of place amongst his youthful, bright features. "Can't say I ever liked him very much."

Despite himself Cheol's unable to hold back the laugh that touches his lips and he reaches out to tousle his hair again. "Trust me, Channie, I completely understand. My father and I were never very close either."

He nods. "I remember you saying that a while ago." Another sigh escapes his lips and then he turns to the boxes Cheol placed on the floor. "I'll help you with those, hyung, and then we can order some takeout?"

"What if I make tteokbokki instead? The way I know you like?"

The grin that spreads across Chan's face is answer enough.

It takes maybe an hour to completely unpack Seungcheol's boxes and Chan fills that time with stories. Usually they would only see each other whenever Sanghoon felt the need to visit his youngest and check on him, and the last time that happened was probably a week ago, so there's a lot to catch up on. Chan tells him about his classes and professors, about the TA he has a crush on ("you should go for it, Channie"). Chan tells him about the books he's reading and how he, Seungkwan, and Vernon binged half of *Itaewon Class* the other night. And Cheol listens. In the time he's spent with Chan the last few months he's realized how much the young man adores Jeonghan and decides that his prison stint must have been incredibly hard on him.

He'd been sparring with Mingyu and Soonyoung one day in December only to stop when Chan had called him crying because he'd failed a test and had convinced himself that would keep him from his degree. So Cheol had talked him down and comforted him, telling him over and over again that everything would be okay. And only when he was sure Chan was all right did he hang up. Mingyu had joked that he was the "replacement Jeonghan" to which Soonyoung responded with "then why aren't you sleeping with him" and long story short the two ended up locked in a battle to the death that day.

Or dinner. Whichever came first.

But now Seungcheol wonders how much truth lay in such a teasing jab, if he really had become Chan's hyung replacement. It's not a bad thing; Chan is a

definite bright spot in this dark underworld and Seungcheol appreciates that Jeonghan and all his friends seem to try their best to keep him from gang activity. So when they finish unpacking and Chan breaks out the aegyo just to confirm the tteokbokki, Seungcheol is hardly mad.

The coziness of the house continues in the kitchen, with a salt and pepper shaker set in the form of an egg and a piece of toast, both with cutesy eyes; dish towels with varying farm animals etched into them; mismatched plates and bowls. It's not at all what one would expect from a wealthy gang boss living in Gangnam and Cheol has to wonder how much of this is actually Chan's taste. Either way, it's nice. Definitely friendlier than Sanghoon's minimalistic, generally monochromatic style.

Chan stays with him while he cooks, even helping him without being asked, and if every night was like this Seungcheol could get used to living here. Would actually enjoy it.

And then Jeonghan comes home and Cheol remembers why he was dreading the move in the first place.

He's accompanied by Mingyu who greets Seungcheol with a one-armed hug and a "hey hyung" before leaning down to scoop Chan into a bear hug. Which leads them to Chan's laptop currently stationed at the kitchen island because he wants to show his hyung his essay.

Jeonghan greets Chan with a kiss to the top of his head and then he meets Seungcheol's gaze across the kitchen. All the warmth in his face immediately disappears and Cheol sighs. Can't he just have one night without this shit? "I trust Seungcheol behaved around you today, Chan-ah?"

Seungcheol rolls his eyes, not caring if Jeonghan sees him or not.

Chan barely looks up from his laptop, frowning at his brother. "What? I - well yeah, of course he did, hyung. Cheol-hyung and I are close, right?"

"You're like the younger brother I never had, Channie," he responds as he turns back to the stove to continue stirring the rice cakes and he surprises himself with the truth in his words. *Huh. Who would've thought?*

Jeonghan makes a noise but doesn't respond and within a matter of moments his black-clad form is hovering near the stove. He examines the cooking tteokbokki with an indiscernible look. *Great.* "You can cook?"

Resisting the urge to make a snappy comeback (he's not sure how much longer he'll live if he keeps that shit up) Cheol just says, "Sort of. I've gotten better since your father forced me to make his galbitang every morning."

Something that sounds like a clipped laugh escapes Jeonghan's pretty lips but Seungcheol can't quite tell because he's not certain the man knows how to truly laugh. "Sounds like him."

And with that he leaves Cheol's side to join his brother and friend-lover at the island, chattering amongst themselves quietly enough that Cheol can't hear them over the stove fan.

For a moment he just kind of stands there, stirring the rice cakes on autopilot, because *did I just have a normal moment with Yoon Jeonghan? Am I dreaming?*

A pinch to his forearm informs him that no he is not dreaming. And then there's a peal of laughter Seungcheol doesn't recognize. It's not full-bodied and goofy the way Mingyu's is. It's not bright and loud the way Chan's is. No, it's deeper than Seungcheol expected, the kind of laugh that literally sounds like "ha ha ha". The kind of laugh that makes you want to laugh too. *It can't be.* So he turns around and finds none other than Yoon Jeonghan giggling up a storm, smacking Mingyu's shoulder while the other man gives him a playfully offended look. It feels like a moment Seungcheol was not meant to see. There's something so weirdly intimate about it; the way he throws his head back, the way his eyes crinkle shut. The fond way he looks at Mingyu afterwards.

He looks so young in this moment, like he belongs in a graduate program or a regular office job. Like he should be spending his Friday nights drinking with his friends, singing along raucously to Big Bang at a karaoke bar. But instead he's leader of the biggest gang in Korea and those are luxuries he isn't allowed. A part of Seungcheol can't help but wonder if he's bitter he

never got to go to college, never got to live a normal life. Would he trade it all for the chance to be an ordinary twenty-six year old, if he could?

It's a question Cheol will never ask and, unnoticed, he turns back to the tteokbokki and finishes it without a word.

The four of them eat - rather, Seungcheol and Jeonghan eat and Mingyu and Chan talk until their portions get cold and Cheol has to scold them into eating - and it's actually not as bad as Seungcheol was expecting. Probably due to the cheerful presence of Chan and Mingyu. Most of the conversation, pushed by the two youngest, revolves around Cheol and his childhood. He talks freely, grateful that the majority of his past lines up with his gangster persona. He talks freely, knowing Jeonghan is listening intently. He doesn't say a single word unless prompted to by Chan ("isn't that cool, hyung?", "yes, Channie"), just watches Seungcheol with those eyes of his.

It's something, Seungcheol is a little alarmed to realize, he's getting used to. Even after a handful of hours.

After dinner Chan and Mingyu gladly take care of dishes and Jeonghan disappears into his bedroom claiming work. As he closes the door Cheol catches a clipped "What is it, Wonwoo?" and sighs. *No rest for the wicked, I guess.*

So he opts for watching Mingyu and Chan at the sink, and he's more than a bit surprised by the domesticity of it all. He's seen Mingyu's hands dripping in blood before but now they're dripping in soapy water. He's heard Mingyu tormenting his victims with the most colorfully graphic threats, threats he's now throwing a laughing Chan's way if he splashes him one more time. And Chan seems less than indifferent as he snarks out a "I'd like to see you try" and Mingyu just pokes his side.

It's like Seungcheol stepped into an alternate universe and he's not sure what to make of it.

As soon as they're done with dishes they clean the water from the floor and counters and Mingyu bids them both good night before heading into

Jeonghan's room. The door locks behind him and Chan sighs as he flops onto the couch, shirt soaking wet.

"Fair warning, hyung," he says, "you might want to sleep with earplugs or something when Mingyu's over."

Ah. Great. "I, uh, don't have any."

"I have some you can have. I bought a pack the night before hyungie was released because I knew I'd be needing them."

Chan's the next to head to bed, after presenting Seungcheol with his new pair of earplugs, and then Seungcheol's more or less alone. He checks on every door and window the way he was taught to do by Sanghoon, making sure everything is locked; even checking the security system a couple times. Just to be safe. After that it's bedtime for himself, though he knows it's gonna be awhile till he falls asleep. *If* he even falls asleep. He's always had issues sleeping somewhere new and after all the stress and events crammed into this one day it'll take a miracle for his brain to shut the fuck up and let him get some rest.

He starts by reading news articles and op-eds because somewhere along the line he became that kind of adult and finds that shit interesting. So he's halfway through a rather interesting read about international politics from *The Hankyoreh* when he hears a harsh, loud clatter somewhere in the apartment, through his earplugs.

His heart leaps into his chest as he fumbles in his bedside table for his gun. Just in case. Taking off the safety he slowly opens his bedroom door. There's a faint light coming down the hall, from the kitchen, and since the security alarm hasn't gone off yet it's either one of the other three people in the house or the trespasser knows exactly how to avoid and/or disarm said security system.

Cheol takes cautious steps down the hall, careful to stay low and not make any noise the way he was trained to - and then he hears something. Something like a - a moan? The sounds are low and throaty, most definitely

sexual in nature, and Seungcheol isn't really prepared for the sight that greets him when he rounds the corner that leads to the kitchen.

Jeonghan stands in front of the stove, upon which there's a pot of what has to be ramen, judging by the open packaging on the counter. Behind him is Mingyu, in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. His long arms are wrapped around Jeonghan's midsection and as Cheol follows the path of tan skin and thick, corded muscle he finds -

Oh.

Jeonghan's clad in only a button-down shirt, one he recognizes as Mingyu's - except the shirt is not buttoned in the slightest. And Mingyu has one big hand on Jeonghan's bare, lean stomach and the other wrapped around his hard, flushed cock.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Those moans Cheol heard belong to Jeonghan, and he grips Mingyu's forearm with one of his delicate hands as he tosses his head back. He looks so beautiful, so ethereal that Seungcheol can't take his eyes off him. The way his long fingers flex around Mingyu's arm, the way his slender neck is marked with kisses and bites. The way his skin is so smooth and pale, like perfect, unblemished ivory. God he just looks so fragile wrapped in Mingyu's big frame even though there's maybe ten centimeters of a height difference.

Seungcheol's far enough away that they haven't noticed him yet but close enough to hear Mingyu purr a "you like that, hyung?" into his ear as he thumbs the wet tip of Jeonghan's cock, eliciting a breathy moan from his lips. Christ, it does things to Cheol and he feels desire pooling hot in his abdomen, stabs of pleasure going straight to his own dick.

Which is ridiculous.

Flipping the safety back on his gun he clears his throat loud enough for it to carry across the kitchen and Mingyu immediately jumps away from Jeonghan's delicate body.

“Shit, Cheol-hyung - “ he starts, hands coming down to hide the bulge in his boxers - “shit, I’m sorry. Did we wake you up?”

He looks penitent, peeking at Seungcheol through dark hair falling in his eyes, hunched shoulders and a crimson flush on his cheeks. But Jeonghan is apparently too proud of himself to feel any shame, not even covering himself up as he turns towards Seungcheol. Those perfect little lips of his - swollen and kiss-bitten - are turned up in a wide smirk, desire dark in his eyes just like the first moment they met, and a part of Seungcheol wants nothing more than to cross the room, close the distance between them, and kiss that fucking smirk right off his face. Make him moan and whine like Mingyu does.

But the way Jeonghan looks at him, the way he bites his lip, the way he has yet to cover up tells Seungcheol that that’s exactly what he wants. And Cheol’s not really in the business of giving Jeonghan anything he wants right now so he stays right where he is. “No,” he says in response to Mingyu, mouth dry, “I was still up. But I heard a noise and got up to investigate.”

“That explains the gun,” Mingyu says quietly, eying it like he's worried Seungcheol might use it on him.

Jeonghan’s smirk only grows. “It’s good that you’re so… on top of things, Seungcheol,” he murmurs and Cheol wonders if he played these games with Mingyu when they first met. If Mingyu’s okay with him acting like this in front of him.

Deciding it’s not worth it to engage him in any way, Seungcheol just nods. “Right. Sorry for interrupting.” After tacking on a “sir” for good measure he heads back to his room, locks the door, and tries to ignore the stirring erection in his boxers.

Tries not to think about Jeonghan moaning like that underneath him.

Tries, and fails.

Notes for the Chapter:

so cheol's thirsty and mad, gyuhan are interesting, lee chan is best boi, the nis are not super helpful, and Things Are Starting to Happen. stay tuned!

thank you for reading ~! <3

Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

ahhh once again thank you guys so much for all the love this has been getting! i'm glad so many of you are enjoying this and i love you guys! <3

tw: a character has a panic attack near the middle and then towards the end there is talk of past non-con but it's not much more than implied.

enjoy! <3

five: trust

Seoul during rush hour traffic is one of Seungcheol's least favorite things in the world. He's heard there are worse places with worse traffic somewhere in the world but seeing as how he's never been to one of those cities before he's content to sit in Vernon's backseat and complain to himself about all these damn people that should be taking some other forms of transportation.

"What kind of imbecilic asshole sets up a drug deal at nine o'clock in the morning?" he grumbles as he adjusts the length of his sleeves, trying to decide if he wants them rolled up to his elbows or down to his wrists.

In the middle of saying something to Jeonghan, Vernon lets out a soft laugh and he briefly turns his head to grin a wide, gummy smile at Cheol. "I know right? But Heechul's always been like that, hyung. You've met him right?"

Unfortunately he indeed has had the *pleasure* of meeting Kim Heechul. The man really isn't so bad, he's just… the most self-aggrandizing person Seungcheol's ever known. Which is funny because he doesn't really belong to any organization, he's just a self-employed drug smuggler. One that Sanghoon loved for his wit and sassy remarks. Seungcheol isn't sure Jeonghan is going to enjoy himself though. "Yeah," he mutters to Vernon, giving up on his sleeves and settling for something mid-forearm. "I usually

went on Sanghoon's deals unless he wanted someone more intimidating. Then he'd take Mingyu."

Jeonghan snorts at this - maybe it's a laugh? - and from his spot in the second row of Vernon's Hyundai Palisade, Cheol can't tell if he's amused or not. Can only see the top of his head and his broad shoulders and that's really it. When Vernon had come to pick them up that morning, a mere few minutes into a breakfast Jeonghan had started by telling Cheol they were heading out on a drug deal, Cheol had offered to drive. Partially because he'd gotten so used to it with Sanghoon, and partially because it was easier to keep an eye on Jeonghan from the driver's seat than the backseat. But Vernon insisted he would drive, probably thinking he was doing his hyung a favor, which meant that Seungcheol had been relegated to the second row of this stupidly big SUV. Directly behind Jeonghan too.

Jeonghan who he saw naked last night. Naked and *hard.* Jeonghan who he'd heard moaning loud and dirty at around two a.m., a couple hours after the kitchen incident, voice high and whiny as he begged Mingyu to go "faster, harder". The sound had gone right through his earplugs (as had Mingyu's low growl of "look how well you take my cock, hyung"; honestly Cheol has no idea how Chan sleeps with that in his house but it's a good thing his room is furthest from his brother's) as Mingyu no doubt pounded Jeonghan into the mattress, a feat Seungcheol is sure the big tall bastard is easily capable of. And in the morning Jeonghan sat down with a wince at the kitchen table, a wince not lost on any of them. But Seungcheol's a professional so he kept his mouth shut.

That, and he's wising up to Jeonghan's little games. He knows if he brings it up Jeonghan will somehow back him into a corner he has no way out of and it'll result in something Cheol may or may not regret come morning.

Vernon fills the rest of the drive with stories Seungcheol's only half paying attention to. Day two without Sanghoon and he can't help but wonder how close they are to the impending gang war. How close Jeonghan is to meeting his end. How close Seungcheol is to fucking going *home.* Hell, he'll take a nice vacation after this. Maybe fly out and see his mom's family in L.A. Get as far away from Yoons and Songs and Chois as he can. God, that'd be so nice and he *definitely* deserves it.

Maybe five minutes from the meeting spot, somewhere near Anseok Reservoir all the way out in Hwaseong, Vernon says something that catches Seungcheol's attention. It's a question no doubt directed at Jeonghan because Cheol's never spent even a single day in prison in his life.

"What was it like in there, hyung?" His usually soft, slow voice is even gentler, like he knows what dangerous territory this is. Sure enough Jeonghan shifts a bit in his seat, gaze finding something out his window. "I mean, you hear stories but it's probably worse in person, right?"

Jeonghan doesn't speak for a few moments, and Cheol figures whatever he went through couldn't have been that bad. He's Yoon Sanghoon's son after all; who would've had the balls to touch him in any way?

Whoever gave him that scar above his eye.

"You know," Jeonghan says after a full twenty seconds or so and his voice is hollow. "It was prison. I didn't really have the time of my life."

"Sure but what was it *like?"* Vernon presses, glancing over at his hyung as he drives. "You were in with Hongjoong-ah and his buddies right? Are they okay?"

"As okay as one can be serving a life sentence for premeditated murder." There's something in his tone Seungcheol doesn't really recognize, and it feels out of place on a man like Jeonghan. It's dark and tortured, halting his words like it's trying to keep information from escaping. Like he has something to hide.

Hmm.

"Yeah I guess that's true," Vernon sighs and flicks the blinker on as they turn down an increasingly unpaved road. *That's Hwaseong for you.* "Damn, kinda wish they hadn't killed that guy. I miss them."

"They miss you too, Nonie," and whatever it was that'd been weighing him down was suddenly, inexplicably gone like it never existed.

A couple minutes later Vernon parks the car, a few yards from another, familiar black SUV - *what is it with drug runners and these cars?* - and the three exit. Dirt and loose gravel crunch beneath boots, signaling their arrival, and Kim Heechul pushes himself off his own car with a wide, gummy smile.

"Vernon-ah!" he cries like he hasn't seen the kid in years and he sweeps him up in a hug.

Getting out of the car two of Heechul's own men regard the scene with stoic faces. Both of them Seungcheol's met before even though he can't remember their names but he *does* know that one of them - the taller, broader one - has a cross tattoo taking up his entire back.

Don't ask him how he knows.

Standing back next to Seungcheol, Jeonghan's face is unreadable, and from what Cheol's gathered, even before his arrest Jeonghan never really dealt with the drug side of the gang, preferring to stay on the sidelines with a sniper rifle. So Cheol's not sure what he's thinking or how things are going to proceed. He *does* know, however, that Jeonghan's never had the honor of meeting Kim Heechul and this is obvious with the low bow Heechul gives him.

"Yoon Jeonghan-ssi, it's a pleasure to meet you," he says. Rising to his full height again he motions behind him at the other two. "These are my men Siwon and Kyuhyun."

They bow too and Jeonghan's eyes narrow for just a moment, wrapping his black coat tighter around himself even though it's almost 15ºC, before he looks back at Heechul, stuffing his hands in his coat pocket. Once again Cheol would *swear* they're shaking but it could be his mind playing tricks on him or something, he guesses. "You have the product?"

Heechul grins a bit. "Straight and to the point, just like your father. May he rest in peace."

Jeonghan merely raises his brows and stays quiet. Yeah, definitely like Sanghoon. Even though he'd loved Heechul's wit he never engaged with it so if Heechul is put off by Jeonghan's silence he doesn't show it. He motions to his men and Siwon, the one with the back tat, heads for the car.

"This is the best shit you'll find here in Korea," Heechul says as his man tugs a suitcase from the trunk. "Direct from the States where somehow it's all perfectly legal."

Siwon sets the suitcase down between the two groups and opens it.

Cheol keeps close to Jeonghan as he kneels down to inspect "the product". He takes out vials of clear liquids and bags of pills with labels in English that Vernon will definitely be able to read, murmuring to himself as he examines them.

"Oxycodone, hydrocodone/acetaminophen, codeine," he lists off in a heavy accent, surprising Seungcheol because he had no idea Jeonghan could even read English.

But there's a lot you don't know about him, isn't there?

Everything he ordered seems to be there; Vernon even goes through the duffle just to double check.

"That's definitely a lot of painkillers and narcotics you wanted, Yoon-ssi," Heechul comments, something worried and nervous in his usually loud, overly confident voice. "Got big plans for it?"

He spares Heechul a cold glance. "That's my business, isn't it?"

Immediately Heechul clams up, offering a smile and a nod. "You're right. My apologies."

After zipping the bag back up Jeonghan stands and tells Vernon to "pay the nice man". Cheol's not sure how many millions or billions of won he's about to drop but since this shit is straight from America and it's more than tough to smuggle it out of there and into Korea, he figures they're handing Heechul

and his men a pretty penny. A few taps on his phone and Vernon notes that the money's in his account, at which Heechul grins and says something about the ease of technology and "kids these days".

And then it's over.

They head back to their respective cars (Cheol decides to sit behind Vernon this time, so he can keep an eye on Jeonghan) and Vernon waits for Heechul to leave before starting his Palisade's engine. No one speaks and at first Seungcheol doesn't even realize something's amiss until Vernon murmurs a quiet "are you okay, hyung?"

Jeonghan's shaking.

He's shaking, wide-eyed and pale and digging his nails into his thighs so hard he could tear right through the pants' fabric if he wanted to. His breathing is quick, rattling through gritted teeth, and he doesn't look *good.*

No, he looks like he's having a panic attack.

Seungcheol acts without thinking, immediately getting out of the car and making his way to Jeonghan's side to open the door. Up close Jeonghan looks so helpless, eyes squeezed shut as his breathing grows more ragged, swimming in the black coat he hasn't taken off yet. Up close Jeonghan looks so *young* and Cheol has no idea what brought this on.

"Wh- what's wrong with him, hyung?" Vernon asks, worry seeping into his voice.

"Panic attack." He reaches for Jeonghan's cold hands, the ones trying to rip the skin beneath his pants to shreds, and squeezes, rubbing his thumbs along Jeonghan's knuckles. There are small scars there, slightly raised along the otherwise smooth skin, like they don't belong there. "Hey, you're all right, Jeonghan. Breathe with me, okay? I'm gonna count and we'll breathe together. Okay? Breathe in, two, three, four, five. Hold, two three, four. Now exhale, two, three, four, five, six, seven."

Vernon even does the breathing exercises too, no doubt in a show of support for his hyung, and after a few of these Jeonghan's body relaxes from the vice grip it seemed to have on itself. He slumps back against the seat, sweat shining on his temples, stray tears gathering in his eyes, and he pulls his hands from Seungcheol's grasp.

"Thanks," he mutters in a thick voice.

"You're welcome, Jeonghan," Cheol responds, giving him a quick once-over with his eyes to make sure he really is okay before he heads back to his own seat.

They're maybe halfway back to headquarters when Seungcheol realizes that Yoon Jeonghan had a panic attack in front of him, and that he'd calmed him down without a second thought. That, really, his only thought had been *comfort*.

Comfort the panicking gang boss who, as far as he knows, still hates him.

The energy in the meeting room is livelier than it was yesterday; when the three of them all enter Soonyoung and Seokmin are doing what Seungcheol can only assume is some sort of skit, complete with silly voices and lots of movements. Some of the members, namely Seungkwan, are laughing rather loudly, egging their friends on with applause. But as soon as they catch sight of Jeonghan everyone quiets down into giggles and soft smiles.

"Sorry hyung," Seokmin says with a sheepish grin, immediately taking an empty seat next to Joshua.

But Jeonghan's far from mad. The smile he wears is soft and fond and as he walks by Seokmin to sit at the head of the table, he gives his brown hair a gentle tousle and an "it's okay, Seok."

As his official bodyguard Cheol takes the seat next to Jeonghan, the one Jaesung would probably be in if he were here. *Should I text him or call*

him? Is he okay? Both he and Byungchul have been decidedly radio silent since yesterday which is only a bit troubling.

But Seungcheol's not allowed to worry for long, as Jeonghan begins the meeting and they jump right into things.

"I'm working my way through the Songs' shit," Wonwoo says as he pulls out his tablet. "As far as I've been able to tell Kyuwon and Yooseok had been in contact a lot over the last few weeks, which means Yooseok's involvement was deep. I haven't been able to confirm it yet but I imagine he provided Kyuwon with the poison. I also don't think many of his men knew what was going on, based off of what I've found."

Jeonghan nods silently, taking this in.

Seungcheol does too, deciding that he needs to talk to either Jaesung or Byungchul and find out just how deeply Song Yooseok was involved in this.

Then it's Joshua's turn to speak and his voice is quiet as he meets Jeonghan's gaze. "I've heard that some of our men aren't… thrilled with the way you handled Kyuwon's betrayal. They wanted some sort of trial or something, claiming that we don't know for sure he really was involved."

A derisive laugh escapes Jeonghan's lips and for a moment he looks dangerous. "Is that right? Well they're more than welcome to join Junhui and I in the basement if they wish to talk about it."

"That's what I told them," Joshua says with the slightest of smiles.

Mingyu gives an update on his end, noting the number of arms and other weapons they have so Joshua can write it down. Of course the number is not ideal and Joshua muses that their contact in the U.S. should be able to get them a shipment soon, placing Vernon in charge of reaching out to her. He nods almost excitedly before announcing that that morning's deal went just fine. And then the room descends into quiet. Outside the doors Seungcheol can hear the muffled bustling of bodies as everyone prepares for war. A war that won't be won.

“Jeonghan?”

All eyes fall on Jihoon and he clears his throat before continuing. “Um, when is Sanghoon’s memorial or - or funeral?”

“Friday night,” Jeonghan responds. “My place.”

“Why there?” Minghao asks.

Jeonghan gives him a slight smile. “With everything going on right now a funeral or memorial can’t be too public. Unfortunately. So it’ll just be us, Chan, hopefully Jaesung-hyung, and my father’s ashes.”

When he’d found the time to get Sanghoon cremated, Seungcheol had no idea. But that’s what subordinates are for, he guesses.

“What about Sanghoon’s friends?” Seungkwan asks. “I’m sure they’d wanna be there too.”

“I asked,” Jeonghan responds with a bored expression on his face, “and most of them said they’d do their own thing. Guess they’re less than thrilled I had you all take their positions, hmm?”

Soft laughter rises above the silence and Seungcheol wonders if any of them worry about a possible uprising or something. Not that there’s many people who would try and go up against Jeonghan, he figures.

Just him, Jaesung, and the NIS.

“Besides,” Jeonghan says, any smiles gone from his face, “he’s dead now. Nothing we say or do will bring him back and it’s time to move on, don’t you think?”

It’s been a day, Seungcheol wants to say. But he doesn’t. He just sits quietly because it’s obvious that Jeonghan is grieving in the way he’s chosen. He ignores the others’ looks and just stares at the tabletop, lost in his own world. After a moment though he finally looks up and meets Wonwoo’s gaze. “Is there anything you’ve been finding that might tell us if the Songs know what we’re up to?”

He shakes his head, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "As far as I can tell, not at all."

"But," Joshua says quickly, "if we don't move soon, Yooseok's gonna start running his mouth and then everyone in Seoul is going to know that one of our own turned against us."

"And we'll look weak," Jeonghan agrees with a nod, as if to himself. He lifts his tremulous hands to the table and then meets Joshua's gaze. "Can we talk, Shua? Alone, outside?"

Joshua nods, of course, and then the two leave the room. As soon as the door closes behind them most of the other members descend into chatter.

"Is hyung okay?" Minghao asks no one in particular.

Vernon shakes his head. "No, he had a panic attack this morning. Right, Cheol-hyung?"

Oh boy. Seungcheol takes a deep breath as all eyes fall on him and lets it out in a sigh. When he speaks he makes sure to keep his voice calm and gentle. "I know you're worried about him, Vernon-ah, but if Jeonghan wanted everyone to know about it he would've said something, right?"

"Oh. Yeah I guess you're right."

"Well you know what I heard from Wooyoung, when I visited him a couple months ago?" Seungkwan asks the group, leaning in conspiratorially and Seungcheol doesn't like where this is going.

So he puts a stop to it. "Guys, enough," and this time he lets his voice be a bit firmer. The others quiet down and look at him with varying degrees of irritation and he sighs again. "I know we're all worried but gossiping about it is not gonna make things any better. Why don't you just ask what's wrong?"

Jihoon snorts. "Like he'd ever tell us."

“Seungcheol-hyung has a point, guys,” Junhui says softly and Cheol’s about to thank him for agreeing when a wicked smirk crosses his face. “So why don’t *you* go ask, Seungcheol?”

God. It’s like being back in high school. “Fine. I will.” With a huff he gets up and leaves the room. He’s not quite sure where the two of them went but Jeonghan had said something about outside so maybe…

Ah, there they are.

The twenty-fifth floor balcony has quite the amazing view of Seoul and Jeonghan leans against the railing, looking down at the city below. The city that belongs to him. Beside him Joshua has a hand on his shoulder, handsome face pinched with worry as he listens to Jeonghan. His lips are moving and the closer Cheol gets the easier it is to hear him.

“... wasn’t him but it just - he looked so much like him, Shua.”

Seungcheol stops at the hallway closest to the balcony and hides there. He’ll probably get more information from here than he would interrupting them and asking what’s wrong.

“You’re out of there for good, Han,” Joshua says. “He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Who?

Jeonghan just sighs. “I - I’ve tried really hard to come to terms with it and just let it go but… God, I *let* him do that to me, Joshua. I - “

“That’s bullshit, Han, and you know it. You didn’t ‘let’ him do anything to you. You had no other choice.”

There’s silence for a few moments and Seungcheol’s heart starts to pound because they could be heading his way. But then Jeonghan speaks, so quietly at first he has to strain to hear him. “If anyone finds out, Joshua, it’ll ruin me. Especially if any of the other gangs get wind of it.”

“I’ll take care of it, I promise. I mean, we’ve still got Hongjoong in there right? He and his boys will make it look like an accident or something. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Great, more murder.

“Han, hey, look at me. You’re out. You’re out and you’re okay. No one can hurt you anymore, all right?”

“Can’t they?” he says around a sniffle. “I had a fucking panic attack in front of Seungcheol and Vernon today, Shua. That’s not - a good leader isn’t supposed to show weakness like that. Especially when all that happened was one of Heechul’s guys looking like *him.”*

So that’s what happened. But who is ‘him’?

“Cut yourself some slack, Han, please. You got out of prison two days ago and your father died yesterday. You’re strategizing a war, basically, and trying to run everything. You’re allowed to show weakness, especially after what you went through. No one would fault you. Okay?”

Jeonghan sniffles again but other than that he doesn’t cry. At least Seungcheol doesn’t think he’s crying. “Come on, let’s head back,” he says and Cheol has maybe two seconds to book it before he’s caught.

Spoiler: he doesn’t make it.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Jeonghan’s voice is cold yet thick with tears and Seungcheol’s pretty certain there’s a good chance he’ll die right now. Sure enough when he turns around Jeonghan’s gaze sears right through him, an angry glare that twists up his handsome features.

“Uh. Just making sure you’re all right, sir,” he says, which isn’t too far from the truth. “The others are all really worried about you and after this morning - “

“I’m fine,” he snaps, brushing past Seungcheol with a huff, heading back towards the meeting room.

For a moment Joshua regards him quietly, dark eyes indecipherable. There’s obvious worry and pain for his friend, yet something else. Anger? Whatever it is it clouds his gaze and Seungcheol kind of wants to just walk away.

“How much of that did you hear?” Joshua asks quietly.

Realizing there’s probably no point in lying, Cheol responds truthfully. “A decent amount. But I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

“I know you won’t. Unlike my stupid, stubborn best friend I trust you.” He sighs heavily and runs a hand through his dark blue hair, dyed a few weeks back because he’d been bored. “During the foreseeable future, you’re gonna end up spending a lot more time with him than I will, Cheol-ah, so please watch out for him.”

“I will.” The words come out automatically. “What’s - what happened to him, Joshua?”

The other man immediately shakes his head. “It’s not my place to share and he’ll tell you if he wants. But just know that he’s hurting. In a lot of ways. Please make sure he’s okay.”

“That’s our next step, getting rid of him.”

“He'll die in the impending battle.”

“Either you or Jaesung will pull the trigger.”

Seungcheol gives Joshua what he hopes is a warm, comforting smile. “You can trust me, Shua. I’ll watch over him.”

“Thank you, Cheol-ah.” The relief in his voice is almost heartbreaking. “Why don’t we return to the meeting?”

Notes for the Chapter:

oof. Things Are Happening and i can't wait!!

originally i wasn't gonna have other idols make cameos in this fic but man, heechul fits that role so perfectly (stan suju). and then jeonghan chilling w ateez in prison? my caratiny heart <3

thank you guys for reading and please feel free to leave comments and kudos! they definitely make my day! <3

Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

oof we got a monster of a chapter today. originally i was gonna split this into two but smut is coming in the next chapter so i just wanted to post this so that way monday we all get smut lmao.

also i know Shit about fighting and martial arts, even after watching countless videos, so pls keep that in mind during the first part lmao

tw: this chapter includes heavy drinking and one very brief reference to past non-con.

enjoy! <3

six: shadows

The training room that takes up most of the sixth floor is probably Seungcheol's favorite place in the gang's entire building. It's essentially a gym with some of the most state-of-the-art tech and a sizeable sparring area set up like a boxing ring. Seungcheol stands there now with some of the other members, each of them trying to figure out how to make a sparring tournament fair with seven people. Apparently Seokmin is the odd man out as everyone else has already paired up - twin terrors Junhui and Minghao, masochistic Jihoon with Mingyu, and Soonyoung and Seungcheol.

"Just let me advance to the second level by default!" Seokmin says as the others prepare for certifiable battle - practicing stances, bandaging knuckles. Pouting like this, arms folded across his chest, Seokmin looks more like a petulant child sulking because his hyungs won't give him what he wants than the smart hacker he is, easily capable of ruining someone's life with a few clicks of a mouse. Complete with the biggest puppy eyes, he implores the others to just let him jump ahead in the roster.

And they're not having it.

“Hell no,” Junhui says as he stretches, one foot propped up on the edge of the ring. “Call Shua or something. Or Vernon. He usually loves shit like this.”

“They’re both busy,” Seokmin all but whines.

“We could have three people fight at once!” Soonyoung suggests and everyone sighs.

“That’s not quite fair either, Young-ah,” Seungcheol says.

From his spot on the floor, stretching out his legs, Jihoon sighs (again). “Is fighting ever really fair?”

As if Jihoon’s point proves his own Seokmin makes a victorious noise. “See?! *Please* let me just advance. I really wanna fight today. I’ve been cooped up with Wonwoo-hyung in his office for like… three days. I *need* the exercise.”

The other six exchange glances and a part of Seungcheol is actually kind of glad he’s here with them. That at least *someone* in this gang likes his presence. Actually if he’s being honest Jeonghan is probably the only person who doesn’t tolerate him. He’s been here since September, after all, and everyone else was ready and more than willing to welcome Jaesung’s nephew. *“Welcome to the dark side,”* Joshua had said with a soft smile, as if at the time he hadn’t been the one Cheol was most worried about accepting him. *“It’s a lot more fun over here.”*

Fun might be a relative term, Seungcheol decides as Seokmin turns those big, pouty eyes towards him.

“Please hyung?” he asks and he looks like he’s on the verge of throwing in some aegyo. Just for good measure. “You’re the oldest out of all of us so you should make the decision.”

But Cheol doesn’t really get the chance to decide anything because a mere few seconds after Seokmin speaks a door opens and everyone tenses just the tiniest bit. Before he turns around Seungcheol already knows who’s joined them and then he hears Jeonghan’s low voice.

“Ah,” he says. “Are we sparring?”

“Sure are, hyung!” Seokmin chirps immediately and then pushes past the others to go stand at his leader’s side. “Will you spar with me, Han? Please? We’re trying to do a tournament but there’s only seven of us. Second place buys lunch and first place gets bragging rights."

That’s when Seungcheol turns around and his eyes meet Jeonghan’s for a split second before the other man looks away. They haven’t really spoken since the other day, after Cheol had… *overheard* his and Joshua’s conversation, and if there’s one thing about Jeonghan that’s impressed Seungcheol since they’ve met, it would have to be his complete and utter stubbornness. In the almost forty-eight hours since that incident he’s probably said a total of ten words to Seungcheol.

It’s a bit infuriating.

Jeonghan glances between the rest of them, decidedly ignoring Seungcheol, and then smiles. “Why not. I could use the practice, especially against Yooseok.”

Seokmin grins wide, probably more excited than he should be. “Yay! Thank you hyung!”

There’s a few more minutes spent getting ready while Jeonghan changes in the locker rooms off to the side, after Soonyoung declared his Doc Martens were unfair. He returns in leggings beneath a pair of workout shorts and a white graphic tee with some English words on it - and somehow still manages to look ethereal, even without the black boots and the black jeans and the black coat. It’s unfair, really.

Jeonghan catches his gaze but turns away before they can really look at each other.

With that, the tournament begins.

Due to popular demand Mingyu and Jihoon go first. Apparently everyone - Seungcheol included, honestly - wants to see Jihoon take on a man almost a

foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than him. And to his credit, Jihoon tries his damnedest. He's small and quick, able to get a few low blows in before Mingyu wises up to his tactics. He's even got their audience cheering for him, the loudest of these surprisingly Jeonghan. But if Mingyu is fazed by his friend-lover throwing his lot in with his opponent he doesn't show it. Actually it seems to spur him on a bit more and he manages to take Jihoon down handily, the smaller man landing on his back with a *whumpf* and a grin.

"Damn," he says a bit breathlessly and he holds his hand out for Mingyu to help him up, who does. "Thought I'd beat your ass."

"Not today, hyung," Mingyu says with a grin that shows off his sharp canines. "Maybe next time?"

Both men are only a little bit bruised, as far as Cheol can tell (but he imagines Mingyu's abdomen is decorated with a number of purple blooms, courtesy of Jihoon's low blows) and at Mingyu's insistence they hug it out. No hard feelings, of course. Not in this gang's makeshift fight club.

Next up, and a little more evenly matched, are Junhui and Minghao. According to their dossiers and what Cheol knows about them, they've both been engaged in martial arts since they were young children and have found ways to effectively translate those skills into their own fun variations of street fighting. Again, fun is a relative term here. Definitely relative.

As they face off against each other, getting into positions, Minghao flashes him a smirk. Pieces of his black hair fall in his eyes and Cheol watches as Junhui bites his lip for a moment, gaze following each one of the young man's movements. Honestly Seungcheol still isn't sure of the relationship between these two, even after six months of knowing them. Isn't sure if they're just friends, sleeping together, madly in love, mortal enemies, or some combination of the latter three. They're usually always around each other - actually he's pretty certain they live together, somewhere in Hannam - and when Minghao's feeling particularly antsy or cheeky he'll mutter something to Junhui in Mandarin. He's the first person to give Junhui shit for his blithe, kind of out-there personality yet he's also the first person to defend him when anyone *else* tries bullying him. Cheol's honestly convinced Minghao would

take a bullet for Junhui - unless he was the one pulling the trigger. Suffice it to say, it's quite the fascinating relationship so this should be interesting.

Both of them move with the grace of dancers, no doubt from their two decades' worth of martial arts training. Eyes flick in quick darts as they follow their opponent's every move. Jaws set firmly, muscles coil tightly as they both try and anticipate the other's movements. For a while they move almost as one, skillfully blocking every attack that comes their way. It apparently captivates their audience since no one speaks or hardly moves a muscle, Seungcheol included. All he can do is watch closely and hope that they don't kill each other.

For a moment they simply stare at each other and Cheol can't help but wonder if maybe these two can read each other's minds somehow. He wouldn't put it past them. And then a wicked smirk breaks out across Minghao's face. He moves faster than Cheol expects, kicking out a long, thin leg and catching Junhui in the shin with more force than someone with his skinny build should have. The other man immediately goes down in a crumpled heap and loud laughter, something that sounds like a curse in Mandarin escaping his lips. Quick hands yank on Minghao's ankle and he lands on top of Junhui with a squeal. His own laughter is the goofiest, undignified thing Seungcheol has ever heard from the man and it brings a smile to his face.

"I don't know who taught you how to fight," Minghao says breathlessly as he pushes himself up, offering a delicate, bruised hand to his partner, "but apparently they forgot the lesson on being aware of your surroundings."

"Or maybe I let you win," Junhui grins. "Maybe I wanna see Mingyu, Seokmin, or Soonyoung kick your ass."

As those three laugh Cheol feigns offense. "What about me? I could take Minghao."

This prompts laughter from the rest of the group - except Jeonghan, who sits with something akin to a fond smile on his face. "No offense, hyung," Jihoon says without a sliver of remorse on his too-gleeful face, "but you cowered behind Mingyu the first time you saw Hao whip out his nunchucks."

That was true and unfortunately not acting. The memory makes him grin though as he remembers the way they'd all laughed good-naturedly with him. "Yeah, well he doesn't have them today. Besides you're looking at a man with a black belt in taekwondo *and* four years of judo. I'll definitely beat Soonyoung at least."

Soonyoung gasps in fake outrage.

Minghao grins as he and Junhui come off from the ring, stretching out his fingers and hands. "I think it's sweet that you believe you could beat me, hyung. Never lose your optimism."

"What about me?" Jeonghan asks as he and Seokmin stand up, and for a moment Cheol's eyes are drawn to him. He didn't get the chance to really look at Jeonghan earlier so now he takes that chance. The leggings he chose have to be the tightest fucking things Cheol has ever seen, and the way they cling to his long, slender legs really is not fair. He lets his gaze travel higher, slowly taking in the rest of him, until their eyes meet.

And this time Jeonghan doesn't look away. No, this time he gives Seungcheol a smirk that seems to say, "I know exactly where you were looking and I wore these on purpose", which is something he definitely would not put past Jeonghan. Not after the other night; Seungcheol is almost absolutely certain that Jeonghan *wanted* him to come out and see him like that with Mingyu. And apparently whatever sick game he's been playing is continuing today. The only difference is that today, Seungcheol's a little more interested in playing.

"I don't think you could take me either, hyung," Minghao says and Seungcheol realizes that maybe three seconds have passed since Jeonghan's question yet it felt like a lot longer. "I mean, I taught you everything you know."

"Could I take *him?"* Jeonghan asks with a thumb in Seungcheol's direction, refusing to even look at him now. *Yeah we're definitely playing a game.*

"Beat Seokmin and find out," Cheol snaps, almost missing Soonyoung's exasperated "I have a black belt in taekwondo too!"

The rest of the boys *ooh* at Seungcheol's challenge and Jeonghan smirks again, though he doesn't look at Cheol still. "You heard him, Seokmin-ah. Let's do this."

Once again, Jeonghan is not at all what Seungcheol was expecting. Except this time that's not necessarily a good thing. He expected someone with Minghao as a teacher to be more… well, *good*. Not that Jeonghan isn't; he manages to get a few hits in between Seokmin's defenses and he definitely moves around the ring with the skills of someone who's been doing this awhile. But there's something off. Like he's holding himself back. His hits could be harder, he could stand to be more aggressive in his movements. Even lithe, graceful Minghao had attacked more than this.

It's like Jeonghan's scared. But of what, Seungcheol's not certain.

Unfortunately for Seokmin though, Jeonghan's skills are still better and he defeats him rather quickly.

The poor kid never really stood a chance to be honest. He's too slow, too hesitant, focusing more on blocking than attacking - which could work to his benefit in some circumstances, if he didn't flinch every time Jeonghan came at him. It leaves him red-faced while Jihoon, Soonyoung, and Mingyu all laugh. At least Minghao and Junhui have the courtesy to keep their giggles to themselves, even as Jeonghan helps the kid up with shaking shoulders.

"You really need to get away from that computer more, Min," he grins as he draws Seokmin into a hug, the apparent unspoken rule of this ring. His own face is a bit red but more from exertion than anything else, Seungcheol assumes, and with his short hair starting to stick to his skin and that smile on his face… well, it suits him.

Seokmin huffs and wraps an arm around his middle as he draws back. "Or maybe I just need to stay there."

Jeonghan laughs at this and reaches out to ruffle his hair. But as soon as he turns to Cheol his smile dies on his lips. "Your turn."

Soonyoung scrambles up and makes his way to the ring like a child hopped up on sugar or something and Seungcheol follows behind like said child's exhausted father. Not that he's not excited to do this. He actually really enjoys sparring like this; has spent about half his life either rising the ranks in taekwondo, training in judo, learning specialized combat for the NIS, or in the military so this is definitely something he likes to do. He just doesn't quite match Soonyoung's youthful exuberance.

Youthful. There's not even a year between you.

Cheol assumes his side of the ring and takes a moment to analyze Soonyoung while they get into position. As far as he knows his opponent has spent at least the same amount of time fighting that Cheol has, except that all of his efforts have been devoted to a singular discipline: taekwondo. Seungcheol is pretty certain he could defeat Soonyoung if he focused on pulling strategies and moves from everything he knows. He's the only one of these guys who knows how to fight like a cop; it may not be dirty or overly aggressive but it is a precise and efficient fighting style. One none of the others really know how to defend against.

Soonyoung attacks first and Seungcheol easily blocks it with a raised fist. As it always seems to when he fights, time slows down. Like it's allowing him to properly examine his surroundings, make split-second decisions. So he sees the smirk that touches Soonyoung's face, sees the fist before it makes contact, and defends himself once again.

"Come on, Young-ah," he goads, only a little bit breathless, and the other man's eyes narrow. "You can do better than that, can't you?"

They both move around the ring, attacking and defending evenly. Soonyoung manages to clock him in the side and stomach a few times and Cheol gets a few hits in there too. But neither of them goes down. Really, it could be anyone's match. At least, that's what Seungcheol lets him think. There's a moment where they both just stand in defensive positions, watching the other. Soonyoung is obviously slowing down, tiring himself out. His reaction time is lessened and Cheol knows it won't take much more to bring him down. If he himself can last that long, that is. The pain blossoming

along his torso is bit by bit reminding him that it's still there; every time he breathes there's a dull pang near his ribs. Something's definitely bruised.

"Come on, someone hit someone!" Jihoon calls from the audience, much to the pleasure of the others, who all laugh.

"Yeah Seungcheol," a familiar low voice says, "put that NIS training to work, hmm?"

If Jeonghan's worried at the prospect of fighting him he's not showing it. No, he's clearly provoking Cheol into taking Soonyoung down and fuck, it's working. Because Cheol wants nothing more than to wipe that fucking smirk off of Jeonghan's face. Wants nothing more than to remind him that he's dangerous too. That *he* should be feared too.

He's not really sure *how* he defeats Soonyoung. It all kind of goes by in a Jeonghan-induced rage blur but somehow he gets the younger man in a chokehold and he can't help but grin when he hears Soonyoung trying to laugh.

"Shit hyung," he manages to get out. "I s-surrender."

Cheol lets him go and immediately he's crushed by a pair of strong arms wrapping around him, Soonyoung's laughter more like a breathless wheezing than anything else, and Seungcheol feels bad that he got him in a chokehold. "You did really well, Young-ah," he says around a pant as he hugs Soonyoung back, that same dull pain in his ribs flaring up again, and he grins because *shit* this feels good. He'd forgotten how great it is to just fight someone; to say fuck it and throw caution to the wind and simultaneously beat the shit out of someone and get the shit beaten out of himself. He's sweaty and breathing heavily, a strange sort of euphoria coursing through his veins, mixing with the pain in a way that makes him feel like he's floating.

Like sex, and it's interesting to Seungcheol how often these two sensations coincide.

"Not well enough apparently," Soonyoung responds as he pulls back, grinning in that endearing way that makes his eyes close. "Have fun fighting

him, Jeonghan-hyung."

Oh yeah. Right. Cheol and Jeonghan share a scowl as the first round two contenders get up. And though this fight should be more than fun to watch - Mingyu and Minghao have incredibly different fighting styles for a pair of best friends - Cheol can't force himself to pay attention.

Not with the way Jeonghan watches him.

They're as far away from each other as they can get, sitting at the edges of the audience, and yet it feels like they're the only two in the room. Even with the cheers from their friends, the battle sounds between Minghao and Mingyu, and the pounding of Cheol's own heart in his ears - he doesn't notice much else besides Jeonghan. The way he looks at Seungcheol with those sad, sharp eyes of his, something unreadable in their dark depths. The way he sets his chin high, his jaw firm, as if trying to convince Seungcheol - maybe himself, actually - that he's not scared. That he can take him.

The thought makes Seungcheol smirk and he likes the way Jeonghan's eyes narrow at it.

Soon Cheol's attention is torn away from him and back to the fight, where Mingyu's looming over a panting, grinning Minghao. So the big tall bastard won again. Of course he did. To be honest, Cheol's not really excited to fight him after Jeonghan because Christ, he'll be exhausted. But he'll do it, because he's *beating* Jeonghan. That much is certain. He watches Minghao and Mingyu hug it out and then it's his turn.

He and Jeonghan enter the ring and Cheol has maybe a moment to breathe before Jeonghan attacks with all the speed and strength he has. He leaves himself open in the process, like he's fighting with his heart and emotions instead of his brain. It's a mistake, one that could definitely be fatal if this was any other situation, and Seungcheol makes sure to let him know that. He easily blocks the hit and gets Jeonghan in the gut in the same breath. Stumbling back with a *whumpf*, Jeonghan's dark eyes sharpen even more.

"You really think you'll get far with Yooseok or any of his men leaving yourself open like that?" Cheol asks.

“Shut up,” Jeonghan hisses. “I don’t need fighting lessons, especially not from you.”

“Apparently you do.” He watches Jeonghan, noting the way his muscles seem to twitch. Like he’s holding himself back. “Try it again. This time work on your defense stance.”

He’s walking a fine line like this, instructing Jeonghan in matters he clearly thinks he needs no help in and if he’s not careful he or Jeonghan or both could end up seriously injured. But he doesn’t want Jeonghan to hold back with him. He wants *all* of him, wants all of his anger and rage and pain because that’s the only way Jeonghan will stand a chance. Both against Seungcheol and Yooseok. This fear, or whatever it is, that he lets stifle him isn’t going to get him very far.

When Jeonghan lashes out again, Seungcheol blocks again. This time he doesn’t hit him back, just watches the way Jeonghan’s handsome face twists up in a scowl. They’re close, close enough that Seungcheol can feel his soft breath ghosting his skin. Close enough that Seungcheol could kiss him if he wanted to. And the thought sends a different sort of adrenaline through his veins.

“Again,” he says. “Stop holding yourself back, Jeonghan. You wanna kill me like you’ve been threatening to for days? Here’s your chance.”

With something close to a growl, Jeonghan draws back. “Shut up.”

“Make me.”

That does it.

Jeonghan lunges in a burst of speed and decks Seungcheol right in the face. He sees the impact, right above his eyes, before he feels it. And then pain, sharp and hot, breaks out across his forehead. Everything *throbs.* His eye, his brow, his head, his skull. No doubt he’ll have a nasty bruise, maybe a cut, and he can’t help but grin as he watches Jeonghan shake out his fist with a grimace.

“Fuck, your head is fucking hard,” he spits from behind gritted teeth.

“That was good,” and adrenaline’s coursing through his body; he feels so alive. “You left yourself open again, though.”

The rest of the fight goes on like that: goads and prods that leave the other seething until they’re able to get a hit in. By the time Cheol’s ready to be done his entire body - especially his head and hands - ache and he’s all but certain Jeonghan would beat him bloody if given the chance. So he takes it away from him. Moves quickly and pins Jeonghan between him and the floor of the ring. Straddles him tight enough to keep him from moving and this obviously pisses Jeonghan off because he growls breathlessly.

And it’s only then that Seungcheol sort of comes to his senses. Realizes that he’s straddling Jeonghan’s slender hips between his thighs. Realizes that they’re both breathing heavily, Jeonghan squirming in his hold, face flushed from exertion, sweat shining on his skin. Realizes that Jeonghan’s t-shirt is bunched up just a bit where Cheol’s knees are, and the strip of soft skin he can see is more than inviting. He wants to touch it, touch *him,* feel Jeonghan jump and twitch under his fingertips. Their eyes meet and Seungcheol’s surprised to see his own desire mirrored in Jeonghan’s heavy gaze.

“Holy shit,” someone says and Cheol remembers they have an audience. An audience that includes Jeonghan’s lover. The guy that Cheol’s fighting next.

He gets up with a groan, body screaming in protest, and reaches out a hand to help Jeonghan up too. Jeonghan eyes the limb for a brief moment before taking it, hoisting himself up with a rough noise that does nothing to quell the fire building in Seungcheol’s gut.

“You okay?” he asks despite the glare on Jeonghan’s face, despite the urge to take him somewhere private and fuck him the way they fought: rough, quick, and hard.

Jeonghan merely scoffs before he’s off, limping slightly in the direction of the locker rooms.

“Shit, hyung, you took him *down!”* someone says from nearby but Seungcheol doesn’t really register it over the rushing in his ears.

He could follow Jeonghan, lock the door, and they could give into the desire that’s been thrumming beneath every interaction they’ve had since they met. The desire that makes Seungcheol hate him more than any threat, any lack of trust because he’s not supposed to want him. No, he’s *supposed* to take him down, watch him burn alongside his gang. He’s supposed to hate him because he’s a murderer, a crime lord, because he goes against everything Seungcheol believes in. Not because he’d feel so good wrapped around him, moaning for him the way he does for Mingyu -

Mingyu.

Shit.

Seungcheol turns around and finds Mingyu watching the locker rooms in an earnest sort of concern, obviously worried for his lover, and Cheol sighs. “You should go to him, Gyu,” he says quietly. “We’ll call it quits here and I’ll get everyone’s lunch order.”

Jihoon and Seokmin high-five.

Mingyu meets Cheol’s gaze with big puppy eyes that make him look so much younger than he is. And without a word he heads off in Jeonghan’s direction.

Cheol watches him go before his attention is captured by the others trying to decide what restaurant they want to order from.

Maybe fifteen minutes later Jeonghan emerges from the locker room with hair that’s too perfectly in place and a flushed Mingyu holding his bruised hand. Cheol swallows the lust and jealousy that still swirls in his blood and finishes placing the lunch order. Everyone changes and then eats after the delivery, Seokmin and Soonyoung filling the silence with stories Cheol only half-listens to. The rest of his attention is consumed by Jeonghan and the red, angry mark on his neck. It’s new, not one given to him by Seungcheol (those would be found in the form of cleaned cuts on his face and bruises he

assumes have formed on his abdomen), definitely not Seokmin. Which leaves one other person who could've given it to him.

He tries not to think about it, Mingyu marking Jeonghan. Whether of his own volition or because Jeonghan asked him too. It makes Seungcheol feel… weird. He can't quite put his finger on the sensation. Just… *weird.*

The thing Seungcheol hates the most about Jeonghan? The fact that he can't actually have him. No matter how badly he wants him. And that only makes Cheol want him more.

Not long after lunch Jeonghan asked Seungcheol if they could return to the apartment. Well it was more of a demand than a query but Cheol nonetheless treated it as the latter and agreed. The fifteen-minute drive to Jeonghan's apartment was done in silence and as soon as they'd parked in the building's garage Jeonghan headed up alone. By the time Cheol made it up the elevator and through the front door Jeonghan already had music blasting as he cleaned the kitchen.

Four hours later, maybe thirty minutes till his friends are supposed to start arriving for the memorial, and he's still out and about in the apartment cleaning, blasting an eclectic mix of Western and Asian pop through an expensive Bluetooth speaker. Cheol had relegated himself to his room maybe ten minutes into what he can only conclude is stress cleaning, opting to do some work with a locked door – and this way he doesn't have to look at Jeonghan's legs in another pair of tight leggings.

Unable to sleep last night (aka Mingyu had been over again) he'd combed the room for bugs. Which is something he probably should've done the first day he'd gotten here - like he'd done at Sanghoon's - but that night had been rough to say the least, with his fucking traitor of a mind filling his thoughts and focus with less than pure images about a certain gang boss. So he did it last night and found nothing.

Which is surprising.

Sanghoon hadn't bugged his room either but Jaesung had been his best friend, so he felt like he could trust Seungcheol. But the fact that Jeonghan couldn't say the same yet hadn't opted to keep an eye - rather, an ear - on him like that? It was almost foreboding in a way. Like another game. But Seungcheol couldn't make sense of it last night and still can't tonight, listening to Jeonghan singing along to what he's pretty certain is a SHINee song. Obviously he's not gonna just ask "hey Jeonghan, why haven't you bugged my room?" but maybe he could bring it up a little more tactfully. Maybe. He'd have to find a way to do that without drawing attention to the fact.

But something tells him tonight is not the night to do that. No, tonight Seungcheol plans to sit back, stay sober, and watch. Because if there's ever a time for him to learn more about Yoon Jeonghan it would be at his late father's memorial, surrounded by his friends. In fact, on his singular trek out to the kitchen for some water earlier, he'd overheard Jeonghan finishing up a takeout order on the phone for an obscene amount of chicken (no doubt he'll put it all on the black Amex) before he'd come out to count the bottles of soju he had in the refrigerator. Cheol had watched as Jeonghan ignored him, murmuring something about asking the guys to bring some soju when they came over, and then he'd walked away.

So apparently he plans to get drunk off his ass and eat a lot of food.

An honorable goal, if Cheol's being honest.

The front door opens and another voice immediately joins in on the loud singing: Chan. Even from his room Seungcheol can hear him giggling as he sings with his brother, and the air in the entire apartment seems to loosen up at his presence. It's enough to bring Cheol out from his cave and he can't help but smile as he watches Chan and his older brother attempt the choreography to whatever song this is. Still SHINee, he thinks. They haven't noticed him yet and for that Seungcheol's grateful - because Yoon Jeonghan is currently wearing the biggest smile Seungcheol's ever seen on him.

There's nothing sinister or sly about it; there's nothing that makes Seungcheol irrationally angry or want to cower. It's a grin of pure joy as he messes around with his younger brother, dust and grime on his t-shirt and leggings,

and just like the other day it feels like something Seungcheol shouldn't be seeing.

And then Chan looks over at him and the moment's over.

"Cheol-hyung, you're here!" the young man chirps as his brother pauses the music with a few taps on his phone.

"'Course I am," Seungcheol responds as he comes over to greet him with a hair tousle. Chan scowls at the contact but it morphs into a grin. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He shrugs, eyes narrowed a bit as he examines Cheol's bruised face, the one that matches Jeonghan's. "I thought hyung might've killed you or something by now. Apparently he tried to."

He says it so casually that a pang of fear settles itself in Seungcheol's stomach, twisting up his insides for the briefest of moments. The sharp peal of laughter, partially devoid of humor, that Jeonghan lets out doesn't help the situation and Cheol fixes him with a look.

"Like you haven't thought about it," he says.

Jeonghan looks at him evenly for a moment and then shrugs. "So what if I have?"

"Hyung," Chan sighs, "that's not nice."

Maybe Cheol's been going about this all wrong; maybe the one he needs to be getting closer to for protection is Chan and no one else. He can't stop the smug smirk that crosses his features as he slips an arm around Chan's shoulders and Jeonghan sends his dongsaeng an offended look.

"Fine," he huffs. "Is your homework done, Channie?"

"Course it is, hyung. I'm not a kid anymore." He glances up at Cheol with something akin to irritation, as if to say *"this hyung…"* and Seungcheol just grins. "That's why I'm a little late today, actually." He pulls away from Cheol as Jeonghan heads into the kitchen, following his brother. And Cheol

follows after *him*. “I met up with Hoseok-hyung after class today so he could help me. It’s the only class I’ve been struggling with and…”

Jeonghan gets into the overhead cupboards, digging around for something. “Who is he again?”

“The TA Channie’s crushing on,” Cheol responds instead as he hops onto the counter, earning an offended shoulder slap from Chan at which he just grins.

This makes Jeonghan stop and he frowns at Chan, a stack of plates in his hands, something unreadable on his face. "You have a crush on someone?"

“Maybe,” Chan responds with reddening ears. “It’s - it’s nothing serious, he’s just… really cute. And sweet. And kind and helpful and funny. And – and he loves dancing too. So we talk about that a lot.”

Jeonghan’s dark eyes flit to Seungcheol for a moment and then back to Chan, and he smiles. Sort of. It doesn’t really light up his face the way it should, and Cheol’s not sure why. “I’m happy for you, Channie. Now why don’t you help me bring these plates to the living room for when the food gets here?”

“Anything I can do to help?” It slips out before Cheol can stop it and there’s an awkward moment where Jeonghan just looks at him silently.

“Sure,” he says finally, after what seems like an hour. “You can bring a few plastic cups out for later. I don’t trust some of these fools with glass bottles when they get wasted.”

“Probably smart,” Seungcheol says and he’s not sure when he decided to *try* to give civil responses to Jeonghan, instead of snide remarks. He’s also not sure if the trend will continue after tonight, though he figures it should if he stands any chance of surviving like this.

Jeonghan’s eyes linger on him for another moment, in a way Seungcheol can’t decipher, and then he follows Chan into the living room, plates in hand.

It takes maybe an hour and a half, two at the most, for just about everyone to get wasted, even with all the fucking chicken Jeonghan ordered. In fact, the only ones not drunk off their asses are Chan, Joshua, Wonwoo, and Seungcheol himself. Who is, a tad unfortunately, stone-cold sober. But it makes for some interesting analyses. For instance, every time Vernon even opens his mouth Seungkwan starts laughing. Without fail. Seokmin is somewhat of a clingy drunk and has spent most of the night in between Joshua's legs, back against his chest, cooing every time Shua takes a piece of chicken from the younger boy's plate.

Cheol isn't sure when *all that* happened but apparently it is.

Mingyu, Soonyoung, and Junhui are loud drunks, making themselves known over the soft music playing through Jeonghan's speakers. Joshua's playlist, if Cheol remembers correctly. But it may as well not even be playing for all the noise those three keep making. Whether it's unintelligible stories abandoned by laughter, or stupid ideas shot down by a half-sober Wonwoo they haven't really stopped talking. Meanwhile the quiet drunks have rented out a corner of the living room for themselves: Minghao, Jihoon, and an increasingly inebriated Chan are talking so softly that Cheol can't hear them over everything else.

And then there's Jeonghan.

He sits quietly too, wholly in Mingyu's lap on the couch, and even though he winces just a bit every time Mingyu raises his voice he doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just sits silently with his head tucked against Mingyu's shoulder, one of those strong, thick arms wrapped around his slender body. He's on his fifth bottle of soju (courtesy of a pre-memorial alcohol run by Soonyoung and Jihoon) and just stares at the urn with his father's ashes. It sits in front of him on the coffee table, next to a plate of untouched chicken Vernon keeps eyeing, and he looks *sad.*

"H*annieeee*," Seokmin says by his feet, glancing up at his hyung with half-lidded eyes. "You should - *hiccup!* - you should say something… ab-about Sanghoon…"

Jeonghan just makes a noise that sounds very non-committal, and then the boys around him start trying to goad him into it, with slurred "he's your father!"s and "a toast!"s. It's enough to grab Minghao, Jihoon, and Chan's attention too and pretty certain all eyes are on Jeonghan. Something he's not thrilled with, based on the way his ears are tinged red, but he stands nonetheless. He sways on uncertain feet and is bolstered by one of Mingyu's big hands on his ass. A hand he just… lets stay there. Honestly Cheol's not even sure if he notices it. He seems really fucking wasted already.

Off five bottles of soju?

He reminds his brain that it's been about three years since Jeonghan had alcohol on a regular basis. And on an empty stomach… well, this can only go well.

"Abeoji," he says, eyes never leaving the vase. In one hand he grips his almost empty bottle with white knuckles. "I always fucking wondered when you'd finally die. I dunno, a part of me always kinda wanted to be the one to do it. I used to think about it sometimes too, when I was - was fucking locked up. You know, nothing like thinking about a little patricide to pass the time."

Oh.

Well. If the room wasn't already quiet it certainly is now and some of them look away in discomfort. Like Chan. But the others - Mingyu and Joshua, for instance - seem to watch Jeonghan a little more closely. A little more sober. Like they're trying to focus on him. Cheol finds himself doing the same, watching all the little imperceptible emotions that flit across Jeonghan's red face. Wondering if he's aware of what he's saying or if he's just - getting it all out.

"I don't know if I would've ever actually done it but fuck, sometimes I really wanted to." He takes a short swig from his bottle, making a face when he realizes he's now emptied it. "Especially when I got thinking about all the shit you've done. The shit you've put your family through. Fuck. Did you ever even love eomma? You sure as hell didn't act like it at - at her funeral."

He hiccups and sways a bit more.

Chan winces, eyes on the floor. Next to him, Minghao offers comfort with a hand on his shoulder.

But Jeonghan continues, not noticing as his eyes remain on the urn. "I know you never fucking loved me. Knew it the moment you put a fucking gun in my hand when - when I was ten. *Ten.* Shit. You know what Channie was doing at ten? Watching fucking cartoons every morning. Because you loved him. Or you thought you did. Shit, he got to go to college. I got to go to prison. And you didn't even fucking *tell* me about it. I sat in a goddamn jail cell for two days scared out of my mind before you showed up and spewed some bullshit about needing eyes on the inside. Y-You needed someone you could trust so you thought it'd be a good idea to send your fucking *son?* Asshole."

Three voices try speaking at once, each of them soft and imploring. Chan offers a gentle "hyung…", Mingyu murmurs a "baby" with a tug on one of his slender hands, and Joshua gives him a "Han". The others sit quietly, no one else daring to make a sound as their hyung's - as their leader's - low voice grows thick with tears. Those tears gather in his eyes and he takes a few moments to blink them back.

This is far more than Seungcheol expected of tonight and he wonders if he should step in a bit more sober, a bit firmer, before Jeonghan says something he'll regret.

But he sits quietly instead, not certain why he gives a shit. There's just something so… tragic about this moment. The empty soju bottles by his feet and the one in his hands. The tears he refuses to shed as he finally says what he's always wanted to what remains of his late father. The obvious pain he's in as he grips that fucking bottle with white, scarred knuckles. The way he ignores everyone around him because he's not done; there's still so much more he wants to say.

So Cheol lets him.

"You could've sent anyone else," he says, a few stray tears rolling down his cheeks. "You had so many fucking loyal brothers who wouldn't hesitate to

kill and die for you, yet you sent me? God and the best fucking part was that I couldn't even be mad. I couldn't say anything, I couldn't fight it because you would've given me some contrived bullshit about sacrifices or - or whatever. About how this life isn't fucking fair. Yeah well I fucking get that now. You piece of *shit*. I missed out on so - so much. Didn't get to watch my best friend fall in love. Didn't get to be there for Channie's first day of classes. He – he's had a crush on someone for who knows how long and I had no idea. Because I wasn't here."

A pang of guilt embeds itself in Seungcheol's heart, even though he has no reason to feel that way. But he does because he knew about it. While Jeonghan was locked up Seungcheol had been here with his friends, with his brother, getting to know them. They had created memories together that Jeonghan would never know.

Jeonghan sniffles. "I've missed *so much,* and for what? So you could play some sick power game with me? Remind me that I'm in this shit for life? As if I could ever fucking forget?" He reaches up to run a hand through his short hair and scowls at the urn. More tears fall now and he doesn't even try blinking them back anymore. "Do you know what I fucking went through in there? What the fuck they did to me? What they… what they did…"

He trails off into a choked back sob, ignoring the comforting hands Mingyu and Joshua place on him, not noticing the tears on Chan's own face, the pained looks his men - his *brothers* - wear. He trails off into a choked sob - and drops the empty soju bottle.

It breaks on the hardwood floor with a resounding *crack!* that sounds so loud and sharp in the otherwise silent room. And before he knows it, Seungcheol's moving. As are Joshua, Mingyu, and Chan. Jeonghan sways back against Mingyu's tall form, eyes fluttering, and Cheol reaches out to slide an arm around his too-thin waist. Out of the corner of his eye he sees red on the top of Jeonghan's foot and a curse from Joshua confirms it.

"He's fucking bleeding," he says in a shaky voice. "Let's - um, let's get him to his room."

"I'll go get a broom," Wonwoo says.

Carrying Jeonghan to his bedroom is a lot easier said than done. First off drunk Mingyu isn't much help so Cheol's really carrying both Jeonghan *and* him, and then the former decides to just dead-weight in his hold so that's nice. Beside them Joshua's going on about how Jeonghan needs to be more careful and he sounds like he's on the verge of panicking. Behind them, Cheol can hear murmurs, the soft *swish-swish* of broom bristles on hardwood, and sniffles. Like someone's crying. And Seungcheol would bet it's Chan. His heart goes out to the young man as he manages to get Jeonghan in his bed, deciding that he's way too sober for this shit.

And no sooner than Jeonghan's laying down, eyes mostly closed, does Joshua step up.

"Fuck, Han," he says, watching his best friend with heavy eyes. "I told you days ago that you need to get help, that you need to talk to someone. And - and now you're drunk off your ass for the second time in a week, with glass in y - "

"Shua," he croaks in response and opens his eyes a bit wider, "please don't…"

Next to Seungcheol, Mingyu sighs heavily. He looks really fucking tired all of a sudden.

"Why not?" Joshua continues, voice rising a bit in his desperation. "If you're gonna be having panic attacks and meltdowns you need to get help! This isn't healthy and I'm worried ab - "

"Stop," Jeonghan says a bit firmer, trying to sit up. "Please, Shua. I-I know, okay? Just… please don't. You can yell at me when we're both hungover. Just not right now."

Joshua takes another look at his best friend before leaving the room with a deep sigh.

Mingyu runs a hand down his face and approaches Jeonghan's bedside. "I'll go talk to him, okay? He's just worried about you, baby. We all are."

Jeonghan looks away from his friend-lover, hands curling in the sheets. “I know,” he whispers.

The younger man heaves another sigh and gives Cheol a look that seems to say, “watch him”, as he leaves the room, and Cheol’s never wanted to not be somewhere more than right now. The moment Mingyu closes the door behind him a stuffy, awkward silence settles in the air, like a window hasn’t been cracked open in weeks, and Seungcheol has no idea what to say. If Jeonghan even wants him here right now.

Well, he can go ahead and make an educated guess on that one.

“You uh should drink some water, Jeonghan,” he tries anyway, even though the other man doesn’t even spare him a look. “You should also probably eat something. Um, I guess I can whip up some ramen if you don’t want any chicken but - “

“Why the fuck are you here?” There’s only a shadow of his usual venom, and Seungcheol isn’t sure if that’s due to the alcohol or the fact that he’s about to pass out. Either way he still doesn’t look at Cheol, eyes half-focused on an empty spot on the wall.

“Well, I’m the best bet to watch over you right now since I’m sober. So…”

Jeonghan makes a face. “I don’t need you to ‘watch over me’. Okay?”

“I disagree.” It comes out before he can stop it and he hopes Jeonghan’s too fucked up to remember this tomorrow. “Mingyu and Joshua too.”

This quiets him down and he glances towards Seungcheol with a trembling chin. If he starts crying again Cheol’s not sure what he’ll do. He can barely handle a sober angry Jeonghan. But sad drunk Jeonghan is a whole other level apparently. “My foot hurts.”

“Will you let me look at it?”

His nod is slight and Cheol moves forward, taking quiet steps like Jeonghan’s a stray cat easily spooked. With gentle hands he reaches out to

hold Jeonghan's foot still. The lighting in the room is a bit too dim but as far as he can tell there are no glass shards in his skin. Just barely-there scratches that aren't as deep as the blood makes them seem. He turns his head to glance at Jeonghan and finds him watching him with half-lidded eyes. God, he looks so small, so broken like this. Not at all like the man Seungcheol was told to fear, told not to cross if he valued his life. Not at all like the man he'd fought this morning. It's such an interesting dichotomy that Cheol isn't sure what to make of it.

"It doesn't look that bad," he tells Jeonghan. "It should be fine but I can go get some bandages if you want?"

"I'm fine," he says but unlike the other day his voice is weak. Tired.

Sure you are. "Okay. You still should drink some water. Well, water, food, and rest. In that order."

He just looks at Cheol with rapidly fading consciousness. "Why do you care, Seungcheol?"

It's a good question. One that he doesn't get to answer because in the next moment Jeonghan's eyes are fully closed as he passes out.

Thank God.

The bedroom door opens again and in comes Joshua, walking a lot more stable than someone with three bottles of soju in their system should. He barely looks at Cheol and makes a beeline for his best friend instead, leaning down to stroke his cheek with gentle hands. Jeonghan doesn't stir but this doesn't seem to deter Joshua, who bends to press a kiss to the other man's forehead.

"Seungcheol," he says quietly and only then do their eyes meet. "I have to go. The other boys are leaving too which means you need to watch over Jeonghan. Please. He needs someone here with him but I have to take care of shit for him so he can just rest."

"Of course I'll stay." He watches Joshua kiss Jeonghan one last time and then Shua heads for the bedroom door. His gait is slow and sluggish, but from exhaustion or alcohol Seungcheol isn't sure. Still it's a little worrisome and Cheol stops him from leaving with a hand to his wrist. "Hey. Don't wear yourself out, Joshua."

His handsome face softens some and he shifts his hand to squeeze Seungcheol's own. "You're a good man, Seungcheol. And he'll come around to you eventually. He just… needs to know that he can trust you."

With that, Joshua leaves and Seungcheol is alone with Jeonghan.

In that moment Cheol realizes that he's never actually been in here before, in Jeonghan's room, and he takes just a moment to look. It's not that much different from the rest of the apartment in that the decoration style is sleek and matches some sort of aesthetic, and there's clutter here too. A familiar black coat tossed rather carelessly on an armchair, a bookshelf partially organized as far as Cheol can tell, more framed pictures on the wall amidst a few art pieces Cheol can only describe as abstract. They don't have any signatures he recognizes (who's he kidding? He knows shit about art) but he likes them. Actually he kind of likes the whole vibe of this room and he bets Jeonghan's more than excited to be home.

If his drunk, tear-filled rant is anything to go by.

Sighing, Cheol gently moves the black coat from its spot on the chair and drapes it along the back before sitting down. He's not sure why he's staying here: call it a weird sense of responsibility since he's the only sober one. Or maybe it's because he's simply curious; he's never been this close to Jeonghan without the threat of callous remarks, torture, or death, and he's not sure when or even if he'll get this chance again.

If you'd told Seungcheol twenty-four hours ago that he'd be watching over Yoon Jeonghan's unconscious, drunken form he would've said you were crazy. But to be fair that's kind of how everything's been going lately: crazy. Tomorrow will be four days since Sanghoon died. Four days since Kyuwon was tortured. Four days since they found out Sanghoon's rival was involved. Four days since he first had his life threatened by Jeonghan. Four

days since Cheol moved into his spare room. Four days since he realized he's somehow attracted to Jeonghan. Three days since he helped Jeonghan through a panic attack and realized that whatever he'd gone through in prison (Seungcheol has a pretty good idea of what it was though he'd never ask about it) was enough to leave him shaken.

Christ, so much has happened in such a short amount of time and Cheol's not certain how he's been able to process all of this. If he even truly has. All he really knows is that Yoon Jeonghan is nothing like he thought he'd be. Somehow he's simultaneously the ruthless, intelligent assassin Seungcheol has been told not to piss off and a scared, vulnerable young man he could see himself befriending - maybe even loving - under different circumstances. Really, he probably should've expected this: no one is a singular dimension. Even Jeonghan's own father, as cartoon villainy as he tended to be, had his human moments where he was more than an evil crime lord. But every day Jeonghan does something new that chips away at the cold, calculating, dangerous persona that surrounds him. Something new that makes Seungcheol wonder just what he's been through. What exactly happened to him in prison, how his mother died, why he stayed at his father's side all these years if this truly is not what he wanted.

He'll never ask, of course, because Jeonghan would never tell him. They don't have that level of trust between them - Seungcheol's not sure they ever will - but in the end it doesn't really matter because all Jeonghan is to him is a job, a mark. A target. Nothing more.

With a sigh he gets up to gently turn Jeonghan onto his side so that he won't choke on his own vomit in the middle of the night (what a way for a gang boss to go) and then decides to stay, Joshua's words ringing in his ears.

"He needs someone here with him."

So Seungcheol curls up on the armchair, which is a lot comfier than it looks, and settles in for the night. If Jeonghan wakes up with no memory of all of this he'll explain himself in the morning. But right now he can't leave Jeonghan alone. Not like this. No, because Cheol's a "good man" or whatever.

Unfortunately.

Notes for the Chapter:

awww cheol's best boy. and jeonghan is Trying and Sad and we love him.

next chapter coming monday! stay tuned! (and thank you for reading all 9k of these words lmao)

Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

oof so yeah remember when i said smut on monday? well uh it's tuesday and,,, still no smut. whoops. that's my b because i definitely didn't plan things right. that's one reason why this chapter is late lmao. sorry guys!

tw: mentions of past self-harm and past non-con.

enjoy! <3

seven: empathy & loyalty

For the second time in less than a week, Jeonghan wakes up with a hangover. Yet this time, it doesn't feel as good and he's not sure why. This time the invisible pressure weighing down his body feels heavier, more oppressive. His head pounds angrily behind his skull, throat sore and aching with every swallow, stomach twisting and churning to the point where he's not sure he can even get out of bed. And then he hears a snore. It's soft and unfamiliar over the rushing in his ears. Definitely not Mingyu, so he didn't spend the night. Actually it doesn't sound like a snore Jeonghan knows at all. Which doesn't exactly make him feel any better. Jutting out a shaking hand he realizes that wherever the snorer is, they're not in his bed.

Hmm.

Jeonghan forces himself to open his eyes and for a moment the world is a bleary blur, brightened by the curtains he'd forgotten to close last night. Actually that's probably what woke him up. He sighs and rubs the sleep from his eyes, trying to make sense of this fuzzy hangover world - when a figure catches him off-guard. They're curled up in his chair, beneath his five million won coat, snoring louder and more obnoxious than Jeonghan thought a person was capable of.

With a loud, drawn out groan intended to wake Choi Seungcheol up, Jeonghan forces himself out of his bed. His body protests with every

movement, especially his foot for some reason, but there's no goddamn way he's letting Seungcheol stay in his room - why the fuck is he even in here to begin with? His noises do nothing to wrench the man from his sleep, however, and Jeonghan decides that a well-placed shove to the shoulder should do the trick. He's also not really in the mood to be nice. Especially not to Seungcheol.

"What the fuck," the other man mumbles, voice deep and thick with sleep, as he blinks big doe eyes up at Jeonghan, complete with puffy cheeks and pouty lips. *Christ.* The moment their gazes meet, though, Seungcheol shoots up and almost knocks Jeonghan in the head, tossing the coat onto the floor in the process. He reaches for it quickly though and places back on the chair. *Smart man.* "Shit, I - "

"Care to explain why you're passed out in my bedroom, Seungcheol?" Jeonghan's own voice is rough with sleep and he really, *really* could down an entire thirty ounces of water right now. Or more soju. He's not all that picky.

Seungcheol stutters for a moment, tips of his ears turning the lightest shade of pink, and then he sighs. "Do you remember last night at all?"

That's a good question. He tries to recall what he can. Soju bottles, fried chicken he wasn't in the mood for. Loud laughter and… tears? Pain? Jeonghan glances down at his foot, sees the scratches - and then everything comes screaming back.

He'd talked about wanting to off his own father. He'd mentioned eomma and talked about Chan and how Sanghoon always treated him better. He'd talked about prison and…

And he'd cried. In front of Chan and Mingyu and Joshua. In front of his men. In front of Seungcheol.

Clearing his throat Jeonghan schools his face into something even and meets Seungcheol's gaze. "Of course I do. But that still doesn't explain why you fell asleep in my armchair."

For a few moments Seungcheol doesn't speak. He just looks at Jeonghan through the pieces of messy black hair falling in his pretty eyes, and Jeonghan doesn't like it. In fact he *despises* the way Seungcheol looks at him in general: it's a mess of pity, hate, and lust, each emotion as dangerous as the others. The morning light changes nothing and Jeonghan can't *believe* he acted the way he did last night. That he let Seungcheol see that side of him; that he showed such weakness in front of him. It infuriates him almost as much as the look in Seungcheol's eyes and he raises an eyebrow at him in annoyance. "Well?"

Finally he speaks, but slowly like he's choosing his words before he utters them. "Joshua and Mingyu asked me to stay with you after you passed out. They were worried but Shua said something about work and I figured," he sighs, "that since I'm your bodyguard I should look out for you. It's kind of my job, anyway, so I decided to sleep in here in case you needed me."

As far as Jeonghan can tell he's being sincere and Christ if that isn't aggravating. He didn't stay so that he could give Jeonghan shit come morning or do anything else nefarious. No, he stayed out of genuine worry - whether he liked it or not. Because of course he did. Because he's Choi Seungcheol and he's a "good guy", or so everyone keeps telling him. "I see. Well you're more than welcome to leave now."

He snorts a bit and the sound simultaneously makes Jeonghan want to throttle and kiss him. Which is a… fun development. "Yes sir." He gives a mock salute that's as sarcastic as his tone and leaves without another word.

Only when the door closes behind him does Jeonghan allow himself to sit back down, since the world has decided to spin now. He holds his head in his hands and decides that he hates everything about this morning. Hates his hangover, hates the fact that Seungcheol was in his room. Hates that he's going to have to face his men in a short while as if nothing happened last night. He feels dirty and gross after everything that's happened the last few days, but it's the kind of dirty and gross that sinks into his being. The kind that makes him want to tear through his own skin until he bleeds so that maybe he'll feel better.

At the very least, the pain might distract him. But the last time he did that his cellmate, sweet, firm Seonghwa, had threatened to tell on him to Joshua. And that had been enough to scare Jeonghan into never doing it again. But he still craves the pain, the distraction. Still needs to feel something other than the throbbing in his head and the self-loathing starting to prickle beneath his skin. So with a groan he drags his sorry ass to the bathroom off of his master bedroom, intending to sober up and wash away the bad feelings as best he can under almost-boiling hot water.

He stands under the spray motionless for a few minutes, eyes closed as he lets the water soak through his hair, his skin. The voice in his head, sounding too much like Joshua right now, instructs him to picture all of his worries just rinsing away and if he wasn't so hungover Jeonghan might snort. But he is *indeed* hungover so he tries said tactic. And it kind of works. The water feels really damn good, all but scalding him as he turns around to let it douse his front. As it loosens up his muscles and washes away any physical grime from the last couple days, he kind of… starts to relax. But he doesn't open his eyes, lest he catch his own reflection in the surely fogged-up mirror he keeps in here, the one he uses when he's too lazy to shave after his showers.

He can't stand to look at himself right now.

So he searches blindly in the shower for shampoo and that sugar scrub he loves, the one Joshua made sure to restock upon his return. He relies on muscle memory as he washes himself, scrubbing a bit too hard on his scalp and his skin; he forgoes conditioner since his hair is too goddamn short to really need it, and then he just stands beneath the spray again. He knows he needs to shave - he hates the way the stubble scratches his hands and his face is *not* made for the scruffy, scraggly look - but that requires looking in the mirror.

Something he still doesn't want to do.

Jeonghan sighs and finally opens his eyes, reaching for the mirror so he can wet it and clear the glass. And then he's staring back at himself, a self he still isn't used to seeing. He wonders if that's partially because there weren't really many mirrors or reflective surfaces in prison and decides that, yeah that's part of it. The other part? He's been almost compulsively

avoiding mirrors since he came back, unless absolutely necessary. His eyes linger on all of his little imperfections: shadowy, slightly jutting cheekbones, chapped lips, too-short hair, the smatterings of acne on his jaw. That fucking scar. He counts each of the cuts and bruises that litter his face, the ones Seungcheol gave him - and then groans.

That had happened yesterday too, hadn't it? Christ. In his pitiful self-wallowing after last night he'd completely forgotten about the tournament. Completely forgotten how Seungcheol's taunts and teasing made him more frustrated than he's been in a long time. Completely forgotten how good it felt to *finally* go at him, to let all his pent-up anger and irritations out in a thinly veiled "friendly fight". Completely forgotten the way Seungcheol pinned him to the ground, strong thighs holding him in place, big stupid eyes dark with desire as they took Jeonghan in. How Mingyu had followed him to the locker room to comfort him, no doubt, only to find him hard and wanting a man he knew he shouldn't. How Mingyu had gotten to his knees, murmuring something about "let me take care of you, hyung," when any other lover should've asked why he was so turned on after fighting someone else, and sucked him off.

How Jeonghan had pictured a certain stocky, doe-eyed, infuriating, devastatingly handsome man when he came.

How he still wants Seungcheol. Would really like to be fucked by him as intensely as they'd fought yesterday.

"Fuck," he says now, the dramatic side of him deciding that this is one of the worst days of his life.

All due to his own actions and decisions.

Great.

Jeonghan shaves as best as he can without really looking in the mirror, miraculously only nicking his skin a couple times, and then he turns off the water. Dries his short hair and wraps his body in the same big, fluffy towel. Leaves the bathroom feeling a bit better than when he went in. His head isn't

throbbing as much, his stomach isn't churning too badly anymore, and those awful feelings of self-loathing are mostly gone.

Until he sees Seungcheol bent over his bed, smoothing out a new sheet set over his mattress. They're black and silk, ones he prefers to keep for special occasions (like the time Mingyu had returned from a two week's long trip to the States, prompting Channie to stay over at Seungkwan and Vernon's for a weekend) and he really has no idea why Seungcheol changed the old ones.

"I thought I told you to leave," Jeonghan says, *very* aware of the fact that he's still a bit wet and wearing nothing but a towel.

Something Seungcheol also becomes very aware of as he looks over. His eyes widen just a bit as they travel the length of Jeonghan's body, something dark and desirable pooling in them, and Jeonghan takes it as a compliment that Seungcheol still wants him even while he's hungover and looks like shit. He closes his mouth, perfectly plush lips forming a straight line as their eyes meet, and swallows. Jeonghan can't help but follow the way his Adam's apple moves with the motion and he bites his lip.

"If you'll recall," Seungcheol says in a voice that's too thick to be casual, "I already did. But I came back to change the sheets because you got blood all over them. Because you wouldn't let me bandage your foot last night."

From what Jeonghan remembers - from what he can see with a single glance down - the scratches on his foot weren't that bad. He's just a baby when it comes to pain so of course they'd hurt. But it shouldn't have been enough to get *that* much blood on his sheets, white as they were. However the thought of sleeping in bloodied sheets makes him want to gag so he guesses he should be grateful. Yet he can't bring himself to say those simple words, those few syllables. So he opts for a clipped, "You didn't have to do that," instead.

"I know." Seungcheol looks at him for a few more silent moments and then scoffs. "Usually when someone does you a favor, especially without asking, it's customary to thank them."

Jeonghan just scowls in return before heading to his closet. "And usually when someone tells you to leave their bedroom, it's customary to *do it* and

not come back." So with something akin to adrenaline rushing through his body Jeonghan lets the towel drop to the floor. If Seungcheol wants to be here, if he wants to play these games - Jeonghan will gladly join him.

From across the room there's a soft sort of spluttering as Seungcheol no doubt takes in his naked form, for the second time in less than a week Jeonghan should add, and he turns his head to catch Seungcheol's surprised look before it goes away. His eyes are wider than Han's ever seen them, lips parted then bitten, cheeks and ears starting to flush. Jeonghan likes that look on him and he smirks as their gazes meet.

"Yes, Seungcheol?" he asks in his sweetest voice, fighting back a chuckle as Seungcheol's gaze turns harder.

"You're something else, Jeonghan. You know that?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Depends on what you mean by 'something else'."

Seungcheol says nothing as he crosses the room in a few slow, focused strides, eyes never leaving Jeonghan's face. His gaze stirs something hot and heavy in Jeonghan's gut and he finds himself pressed against the closet door as Seungcheol stops close enough for Jeonghan to feel his warm, minty breath on his face. Close enough that Jeonghan can see every cut and bruise he gave in return yesterday. Close enough that Jeonghan could lean forward and they'd be kissing. And he *wants* to, he wants to reach out and touch Seungcheol. But he doesn't; he just stays still and hopes that Seungcheol isn't that dense and will realize what he wants by a few well-placed glances at his plush lips. Because there's *no way* Jeonghan's breaking first. He'll give in when Seungcheol will.

If Seungcheol will, his brain not so helpfully corrects. There's nothing about him right now that even makes Jeonghan think he'll give in first. Not the firm way his jaw is set, not the hard look in his eyes, not the way he reaches out and rests his hand on the closet door, right next to Jeonghan's head. God, he just hates how Seungcheol looks at him. How it steals his breath away.

"I don't want to play these games anymore, Jeonghan," he says.

The desire to act dumb, to piss him off, rises up before he can stop it. "What games?" As if he isn't completely naked in front of him, body thrumming with the easily crossable distance between them.

Seungcheol scoffs. "Don't. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about. I don't know what your - your angle is but you've been fucking with me since the moment we met. I get that you don't like me and I sure as hell don't like you, but I'm done. If you want me, tell me."

If only it could be so simple. Yoon Jeonghan isn't someone who breaks easily. Never has been and never will be. "Is that right? Fine then, Seungcheol. Do you want *me?"*

"Yeah," he says without missing a beat, voice dry as he swallows, and Jeonghan wishes he could pretend that it doesn't stoke the fire in his gut. "It drives me fucking crazy but I do want you. I just don't like these games you keep playing. All your little flirty glances that first day, threatening me and then letting me see Mingyu feeling you up in the kitchen, ignoring me in front of everyone else, and then *this?"* He sighs softly. "I'm not doing this shit anymore. You want me, you tell me."

The fucking thing about it is Jeonghan *does* want him. But he's not saying it; he's not opening himself up like that quite yet. Especially not with the way Seungcheol's looking at him. So he pushes him away. Surprising him just a bit, Seungcheol moves with his hands, stepping back until Jeonghan feels like he can breathe again. "I want a rematch," he says instead of what Seungcheol wants to hear. "From yesterday."

If he's hurt by the fact that Jeonghan didn't say what he wanted, Seungcheol doesn't show it. He just scoffs a bit. "You think you can beat me like this? Hungover? Yeah right."

"Then train me," Jeonghan snaps. "Since you're such an amazing fighter and I'm not."

If we're not fucking, we can fight again.

It's dangerous territory, he knows. If the others hadn't been there yesterday, Jeonghan's all but certain they would've done something. If Seungcheol had followed him to the locker rooms instead of Mingyu, Jeonghan would've kissed him at the very least. And being alone with him in the training room, watching the way his muscles move under his shirt and workout pants, the way his skin flushes, the way his hair sticks to his face, the noises he makes… Jeonghan knows they're not making out of this unscathed.

The heavy look in Seungcheol's eyes tells him he realizes this too, and he nods. "Fine. But you can't be… you know, *you* about it."

"And just what the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if you piss me off enough for real, I'm done. A lot has happened in the last, I dunno, five or six days or so, and I've been trying hard to prove what you want: that I'm on your side."

Which is true, if Jeonghan has to admit it. Actually Seungcheol hasn't done anything to the contrary: everything he's done since Sanghoon died has been for the gang. He's been cooperative (generally), getting along with the others - especially Chan - keeping his mouth shut and doing his job when he needs to. Even the little things. Like calming Jeonghan down from a panic attack. Like staying with him all night. Like changing his bloody sheets. Maybe… maybe that's why the urge to hate him is so strong. Because at his core, Seungcheol is obviously a decent person. Jeonghan doesn't know a lot of people that would act the way he does in the face of - of everything. Fuck, if he was in Seungcheol's place he would've either killed someone or up and left four days ago. Said "fuck it" because innocent people shouldn't be treated that way.

Innocent. Is that what he is?

With a sigh Jeonghan agrees to Seungcheol's singular term.

He nods. "Good. Now please get dressed. I'm gonna go make sure Channie's doing okay."

Chan. Shit. It doesn't take Jeonghan long to put on some clothes, his usual black of course, and then he makes his way down the hall through Chan's open bedroom door. He's sitting up in bed, massaging his temples, and Seungcheol sits beside him with an arm around him, murmuring something Jeonghan can't hear.

"Channie?"

He looks up with bleary, bloodshot eyes and manages to smile. "Hey hyung. You look like shit."

"So do you." As Jeonghan crosses the room to him, Seungcheol moves from the bed, saying something about checking on the haejangguk he ordered, before he leaves the room entirely. Jeonghan takes his spot on the bed and reaches out to smooth Chan's messy hair, trying his best to detangle it with his fingers. Chan closes his eyes at the sensation. "Are you feeling okay?"

He shrugs. "Everything kinda hurts but that's what happens when you drink, I guess." One eye cracks open and lands on Jeonghan. "Are - are *you* okay, hyung?"

"I am," he half-lies, smoothing Chan's hair off his forehead the way he likes. The way eomma used to do. "I'm sorry you saw that last night."

"I'm just glad you're okay," Chan mumbles as he buries his face in Jeonghan's shoulder. "I'm also glad today is Saturday because there's no way I'd be going to any of my classes like this."

Jeonghan grins and holds his brother close with an arm around him, fingers still in his hair. "You should rest some more. Seungcheol and I probably won't be home a lot, not until later at least."

"You guys fought yesterday, huh?"

"It was a… friendly fight."

Chan snorts. "Not from what Jihoon was telling me." He looks at Jeonghan with something akin to puppy-dog eyes and Jeonghan sighs. "I-I know you

might not want to hear this, but Seungcheol-hyung was… really good while you weren't here. He kinda filled your spot, you know?"

I know, he wants to say, *and that's another reason why he pisses me off so much. Because he got to be here with everyone while I couldn't.* But Jeonghan doesn't say that; he just hums. "Rest, Channie. When the haejangguk gets here I'll bring you some. And I'll text Kwan and Vernon and ask them to stay with you today."

Chan scowls a bit. "They're my best friends and all but why do I need people with me all the time? You know, Wonwoo-hyung scared the shit out of my professors yesterday. Even Hoseok-hyung was kinda freaked out and like, I don't wanna scare him with my brother's intimidating bodyguards or whatever."

Jeonghan sighs, but he's been expecting this. "First of all, Wonwoo isn't scary."

"Yes he is! He might be skin and bones but have you *seen* his face? Damn."

"Second of all," and Chan mumbles something under his breath, "this Hoseok kid needs to learn that if anyone fucks with you, they'll have a lot of other scary people to answer to. Scarier than Wonwoo."

Chan snorts at this. "Hoseok's older than you, hyung. By like almost two years."

Jeonghan makes a face because why is Chan crushing on someone so much older than him? *He's an adult,* his brain reminds him, *and he can make his own decisions.* "Still. The point, Channie, is that I don't want to lose you. I have a lot of enemies, abeoji had a lot of enemies, and I'm not letting *anyone* hurt you. So I know it's annoying have people with you all the time but it's either that or…"

He scoots closer to Jeonghan and for a few moments he doesn't speak. But when he finally does he sounds so young and scared that it breaks Jeonghan's heart and he wishes to *God* that Chan had been born in another family, another life. That at the very least he'd been one of Sanghoon's mistresses'

kids. The ones who don't even know who their father is, and never will. "Do you really think someone would hurt me?"

"I don't know," Jeonghan answers honestly, "but I swear to God I'll never let them. Okay? As long as I'm around no one will ever hurt you." He kisses his head. "As long as Kwan and Vernon and Mingyu and Wonwoo and Junhui and - and Seungcheol, and everyone else, are around you're safe, Chan."

He just nods.

"And I don't want you to be scared. That's the last thing I want."

"Eomma was scared," he whispers, and Jeonghan holds him closer.

"I know. Abeoji - abeoji fucked that up. He didn't protect her but I promise you, I won't make that mistake. I'm not abeoji; I'll keep you safe. Okay, Channie?"

"Okay, hyung."

Jeonghan draws back and lifts Chan's head up to kiss his forehead. "I love you."

"I love you too, hyung."

Kim Hongjoong has done a lot of shit in his life that he probably shouldn't have but he doesn't regret a single thing. He doesn't regret joining up with his best friends in Yoon Sanghoon's gang when he was fifteen. Doesn't regret the things he did in Sanghoon's name. Doesn't regret the crime that's landed him here, with a life sentence in prison, even though he probably should. But he doesn't because everything he's done has been out of loyalty. Loyalty to his family, loyalty to his friends, to his ideals, to himself. And that's a good reason to do something for someone, isn't it?

Kim Hongjoong might be loyal but he isn't stupid. He knows that, to Sanghoon, he was just some dumb kid that followed along with whatever his boss wanted. Some dumb kid he could make do whatever he wanted. And in

retrospect, a part of Hongjoong wishes he *hadn't* been so loyal. Because instead of being locked up in a cell for the rest of his life, he could still be out doing things for the gang. Helping Jeonghan run things, because if there's someone who's not cut out for that shit, it's him. But brooding about the past won't change a thing so Hongjoong doesn't let himself dwell. No reason to; regrets just make a person unhappy.

That's one reason why he knows he won't regret *this*.

He looks down at the mess he's made and takes a step to the side as blood threatens his bare feet. If the guard's still alive, he won't be for long because if there's anything Hongjoong's learned since coming here, it's how to kill a man quickly and without a sound. He's bleeding out from one punctured lung, staining the already dingy prison floors with crimson, and somehow it's not enough to quell the anger that runs through Hongjoong's veins. Not after what this piece of shit *did*.

That's the other reason why he won't regret this. No, this sick excuse for a human being - the one who spent his days leering at Wooyoung and Yeosang, the one who'd forced Jeonghan to do awful things in exchange for him not touching Hongjoong's men - *deserves* to die like this, bleeding out in the prison he thought he had control over.

"You did it."

Seonghwa's voice is soft but hardly awed and Hongjoong glances over his shoulder, towards Hwa's bunk. He can't really make out his features in the darkness but he knows the look on his face. It's the same one he gave him after they'd killed the undercover cop Sanghoon had found in his Daegu branch. The one that promises unconditional support and love because Seonghwa is *loyal*. "Yeah," Hongjoong responds, sounding like a scream in the night silence. "Of course I did."

He thinks he sees Seonghwa nod. "I'll get the message back to Joshua-hyung."

Hongjoong looks back at the guard on the floor. Come morning the others will find him, and with his track record of abusing prisoners, there isn't much

punishment that awaits Joong. Besides everyone else in this prison knows who Hongjoong is, who he works for. Who he's loyal to. And this guard was the only one fucking stupid enough to try and hurt Yoon Jeonghan. So Hongjoong knows he's safe.

"Hwa?" he asks the darkness. "I know there's not much we can really do, but if Jeonghan needs any more favors, let Joshua-hyung know that we've got his back. Okay? He - we owe him a lot."

"I know."

Hongjoong turns from the cell door and makes his way over to his own bunk. He lays down and within a matter of minutes, he falls asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

lmao listen stan talent, stan ateez.

thank you so much for reading! love you guys! <3

Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

so uh if you'll note rating has gone up (bc i can), tags have been added... 👀

tw: implied/referenced past non-con, a little bit of blood, and i think that's it?

enjoy!!! <3

eight: blood, sweat & tears

The drive to headquarters is done in silence, with Jeonghan in the backseat looking out the window at the buildings that pass them by. Seungcheol can't stop thinking. He's now seen Jeonghan naked twice in less than a week and, for some reason, thought it would be a good idea to confess how he feels. Which is only going to give Jeonghan more to hold over his head in the long run, because he's Yoon Jeonghan and Cheol gets the feeling that he doesn't like caving, giving in. You know, just a feeling. And now Cheol's going to be training him to fight. He'd had no choice but to agree; even though it might spell certain death for him in later on he couldn't say no because doing so could inadvertently blow his cover. But it means that they'll be alone together, sparring together, and Seungcheol's not certain he'll be able to stop himself from touching Jeonghan if he looks at him the way he did yesterday. The way he did this morning.

When they get to headquarters Jeonghan tells him to head to the training room to get things set up while he goes and takes care of business. Honestly, Seungcheol isn't really sure how well training is going to go today, what with Jeonghan's hangover, but he'd be lying if he wasn't weirdly excited to be alone with him. He blames it on the fact that he hasn't had sex in like a year and on the fact that Jeonghan is definitely hot. Which is something he never thought he'd say but things change, right? His phone vibrates on the floor

beside him and he takes a break from stretching to answer the call, without checking the ID.

“Seungcheol.”

He frowns at the voice, one he hasn’t heard since Tuesday so… about four days ago? “Samchon,” he says and Jaesung sighs on the other end. “Where have you been? Are you okay?”

“More or less. It’s been a rough few days for me. Sorry I couldn’t - couldn’t make it last night.”

“You missed a lot,” Cheol says around a scoff, unable to help himself. “Everyone got *wasted.”*

“Sounds about right. Did you get anything that could help us take down Jeonghan?”

He thinks for a moment, thoughts going back to last night. And yeah, maybe he did. But it was all really personal stuff. Personal stuff Jeonghan obviously didn’t want anyone knowing, since he’s never talked about it sober with the others. Personal stuff that Seungcheol doesn’t feel comfortable disclosing, at least not over the phone. “Uh, no. Not really. He didn’t talk much.”

There’s a moment of silence and then Jaesung sighs again. “I see. Has Byungchul contacted you recently?”

God. At the mention of his section chief he scoffs again, irritation prickling under his skin. “Not since Tuesday. But I just blamed that on his usual brand of incompetent NIS bullshit.”

Jaesung gives a chuckle that crackles over the line. “I get it. Well the three of us need to meet to discuss things. Today at the park? Are you busy right now?”

He hears the training room door open and watches Jeonghan walk in, heading straight for the locker rooms to change, probably. “Yeah actually. I’m, uh,

bonding with Jeonghan. Sort of."

"Oh. You guys have been getting closer lately?"

"Um, I guess you could say that. He hasn't threatened to kill me since - well Tuesday, actually. We did spar yesterday and we both sort of went a bit crazy but I think that might've helped things, you know? Boys will be boys and all that shit."

"Indeed. All right well call or text when you're done with Jeonghan and we'll meet."

Seungcheol agrees and ends the call. A few moments later, as he finishes up stretching, Jeonghan comes back out. He's in an outfit similar to the one yesterday and Seungcheol hates how he reacts to it. How good Jeonghan looks in it. But he supposes that's all part of their little game, isn't it? A game Cheol doesn't want to fucking play anymore but he will, he *does,* because he can't help it. Because Jeonghan just draws him in with his flirty looks and low voice and ethereal features and really, Cheol's a fool if he ever thought he could be anything else but under Jeonghan's spell. He's a fool if he ever thought he could break free and tell Jeonghan *no.* Their eyes meet, Jeonghan's a little puffy and bloodshot like he's been crying, and he smirks the way he always does, with that same aloof, casual air that screams *I don't give a shit about you.*

Cheol wonders how practiced it is.

"Shall we?" Jeonghan asks.

"Were you crying?" Cheol says in lieu of a response, unable to help himself.

Jeonghan nods after a moment. "Yeah. I, uh - someone I really hate is dead now, as of last night, and it made me happy. Happy enough to cry, I guess."

"I'll take care of it, I promise. I mean, we've still got Hongjoong in there right? He and his boys will make it look like an accident or something. Okay?"

Cheol remembers that conversation: Jeonghan and Joshua discussing his apparent abuser, the latter saying they'd use their men on the inside to off him. At least Seungcheol hopes it's that man who's dead. He's not sure who else it might be, besides Yooseok, but he would've been told about that, right? "That's good," Seungcheol says truthfully. "It's nice when that happens."

Jeonghan nods again. "Kind of – kind of wish I'd been the one to do it but oh well. We can't always get what we want, right?"

"Right." He looks away for a moment. "So uh yeah, we can start. You need to stretch first. I noticed that you didn't yesterday and that's one reason why you're so sore today."

Jeonghan makes a face. "Fine. Why don't you show me?"

If he's expecting Cheol to get down on the floor and manhandle him into the best stretching positions… well he would. Partially because somehow Jeonghan has him desperate for him; desperate to feel him under his hands and his body in any way that he can and partially because he just can't say no anymore. Even if he might want to. But he's not going down without a fight, so he just huffs. "Sure. Watch carefully, okay?"

They start with a simple one: sitting down with their legs straight out in front of them, and Cheol shows him the proper way to bend towards his toes with his hands outstretched. After a few moments Jeonghan makes a whiny noise that goes straight to Seungcheol's cock and complains that he can't do it.

Somehow, miraculously, they're able to get through stretching without Seungcheol placing a single hand on him. But it's more out of his own self-constraint than anything else; he might be playing these games again, goddamn it, but he's not giving up that easily. Or so he keeps telling himself. Because the next step is to actually start training, sparring, and if it's going to be anything like yesterday Seungcheol doesn't stand a chance.

He begins by showing Jeonghan a few easy moves he picked up at the police university, ones that are a bit more defensive than aggressive, and he tells Jeonghan he's starting with these because "I think they're more your style."

To which Jeonghan scowls. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

Cheol shrugs, pretending to be casual. “It just seemed like you were holding yourself back yesterday so I figured that maybe you’re not the biggest fan of attacking; that you would prefer to stay back and let your opponent tire themselves out.”

“Oh. I… guess you’re right. I never gave it much thought before.”

“I kind of figured. See, fighting is more than just throwing punches. You have to *think.* You can’t just go in blind and confident because the odds of you winning like that are slim to none. You have to analyze, both your own skills and your opponent’s. You have to analyze where you’re fighting, why you’re fighting, why your opponent’s fighting. What you both stand to lose, what you stand to gain.” Shit. Cheol has no idea why he’s telling him all this, why he’s actually helping. He blames it on the cover.

Jeonghan makes another face. “Sounds complicated.”

“It can be. You get used to it and it becomes like second nature eventually. Did Minghao never tell you this kind of stuff?”

Jeonghan shrugs. “Abeoji just told him to teach me how to throw punches. Then after him I learned more from Mingyu. But with both of them it was more about technique, how to beat someone bloody. They never really taught me how to think about it.”

“That explains why you suck at fighting.”

“Fuck you.”

They spar for what has to be hours, ranging from easy defense moves to more aggressive attacks that leave Jeonghan seething on the floor. More than once he huffs a fit about “I can’t *do* this!” yet every time Cheol suggests a break he refuses. He’s still holding back, Cheol notices. As if he’s scared. Like yesterday he does manage to land a few hits that leave Seungcheol

momentarily dazed but it's nothing compared to the amount of times Cheol ends up pinning him, or sweeping his legs out from under him, or stopping him from behind with an arm wrapped around his neck in a half-headlock. A few of those techniques are definitely games of Seungcheol's own and he has to admit, he likes the way Jeonghan feels like this. Pressed against him, back to chest, pulse hammering under the hand Cheol's got loose around his throat. They're about the same height, give or take a couple centimeters, and he makes sure to brush his lips against the shell of Jeonghan's ear when he speaks.

"That was better but you still left yourself open," he murmurs and the heat from Jeonghan's body is almost too much. "You *keep* leaving yourself open."

"It's not my fault you have the reflexes of - of Spider-man or something." His tone turns teasing, like he's trying to wrestle control away. "What, do your Spidey senses tingle when you fight, Cheol?"

Cheol. He grins at the nickname, liking the way it sounds in Jeonghan's mouth. "Something like that." He releases him and Jeonghan looks at him, biting his lower lip. But Seungcheol's not giving in. No way, no how. "You… you don't like fighting, do you?" he asks quietly.

The change is instantaneous: Jeonghan clams up, bow lips forming a taut line, shoulders tightening, posture straightening. Any semblance of vulnerability is gone. "What are you talking about?"

"You - well, you hold yourself back when you spar. You did yesterday, you keep doing it today. Is it - " He takes a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Are you afraid of getting hurt?"

He scoffs but it seems forced. "Hardly."

"Okay. Then…" He tries putting the pieces together. Why Jeonghan would only use a sniper rifle in his killings. Why he threw up after barely torturing and killing Kyuwon. Why he hardly attacks during fights. Why he never made good on his threats to kill Seungcheol when almost anyone else in this gang would've followed through. He meets Jeonghan's hard gaze. "You don't like it, do you? Fighting, killing, torturing. It - "

“Shut up,” he hisses and Cheol can’t help but wonder what kind of bullshit Sanghoon told him growing up to make him feel like he can’t be vulnerable. What exactly he’s gone through in his almost twenty-five years of being alive to make him feel like he has to be a tough, masculine crime lord. Like his father. “Just - just shut up. Okay?”

He probably should but he doesn’t. God, he’s getting closer to figuring him out. “Jeonghan, that’s - “

“What? That’s what, Seungcheol?” His tone is harsh. “Wipe that fucking look off your face. I don’t need your pity. And I don’t need your help.” He moves to leave but Seungcheol grabs his wrist as he walks by and something flashes across Jeonghan’s face. “Let me go, I swear to - “

“Nice try,” he says instead of releasing him, “but you *do* need my help since there won’t be many chances for you to take down Song Yooseok with a sniper rifle.” With a sigh he finally lets him go and their eyes meet. Jeonghan looks defiant, staring him down with anger and something else Cheol can’t quite put his finger on. But they’re close again. Close enough that Seungcheol can see the minute way in which his chin trembles. Like he might cry. “Christ, Jeonghan,” he says quietly. “I’m on your side, okay? I’m not gonna judge you. I just - want to help you. So for the love of God swallow your pride and let me teach you how to fight so that you don’t die.”

Jeonghan’s quiet for a moment and then he nods. “Fine. Teach me.”

They go for a few more rounds and it’s like Jeonghan finally allows himself to *listen,* to think. He blocks Cheol’s attacks quicker, more deftly, and stops leaving himself open so much. And just like Cheol figured he favors the defense moves he was taught, allowing Cheol to tire himself out striking and striking. Well not that Seungcheol ever actually gets too tired because he knows how to conserve his stamina but it’s definitely an improvement over the last several rounds.

And then Jeonghan ends up pinning him.

He’s not quite sure how it happened, how Jeonghan managed to take him by surprise, but nonetheless he finds himself on his back between Jeonghan and

the ring floor. He stares up at Jeonghan, who's panting and flustered, skin shining under the harsh lights of the gym, eyes dark as he looks down at him; hands on the mat on either side of Cheol's face and they're *so close*. As if on instinct Cheol's hands find their way to Jeonghan's slender thighs and he knows that he could easily flip them both over, regain control of the situation - Jeonghan is *hardly* heavy - but he doesn't want to. He could easily pull Jeonghan down into a kiss, let him know just how badly he's been craving what he shouldn't have. But he doesn't want to. He wants to see what Jeonghan will do with the power he holds now.

"That was good," Cheol murmurs. "You're learning."

He can feel Jeonghan's hot breath on his skin, can feel the way his thigh muscles twitch and jump under his hands and he can't help but squeeze just a bit. Something akin to a moan escapes Jeonghan's mouth and his eyes fall to Cheol's. He licks his lips. Looks back up at Cheol. And he can't fucking take it anymore, games and power plays be damned.

He surges up and captures Jeonghan's mouth in a rough kiss.

And it feels so goddamn good.

Jeonghan kisses him back just as hard, hands moving to cup his face, bringing them closer together. The moment their tongues touch, desire pools like liquid heat in Cheol's belly and he wants more, *needs* more. Even though they're all but pressed together, even though he finally has Jeonghan in his arms, moaning into his mouth with each squeeze he gives his thighs, it's not enough. Not nearly. He brings one hand to the back of Jeonghan's head, combing through the short, sweaty hairs, and holds him tight, holds him closer because he needs to feel every inch of him. Wants every inch of him.

Someone draws blood - he thinks it's Jeonghan - so Cheol retaliates with a harsh hand sliding beneath his t-shirt, scratching with blunt nails till he feels the skin break and then Jeonghan draws back with a hot, broken moan. Their eyes meet once more, Jeonghan's half-lidded and almost black with lust, Seungcheol's blood on his lips and when Cheol licks his own he feels the sting of Jeonghan's bite.

“That hurt,” Jeonghan says in a breathless whine that really shouldn’t be legal.

“Yeah and it hurt when you bit me, asshole.”

“You liked it.”

“And you liked it when I scratched you,” he shoots back immediately.

A quick move later and Cheol’s got Jeonghan on his back, pinned between him and the ring, and he looks good like this. Kiss-bitten lips, flushed skin, chest rising and falling with each deep breath he tries to catch. So he leans down and kisses Jeonghan again, the coppery taste of blood in his mouth. Hands tug at clothes and scratch at bare skin in unspoken punishments, teeth catch lips and tongues coil and the liquid heat gathering in Seungcheol’s belly is too much. He needs - he needs *Jeonghan.* Needs all of him, needs him *now.* Something he whispers to Jeonghan in between heated kisses along his slender neck, between bites because already he enjoys marring his perfect skin.

“Then fuck me,” Jeonghan breathes out in response. He ruts his hips, effectively dragging his clothed erection against Seungcheol’s, and they both moan at the hot friction.

Fuck, Cheol likes the way those words sound in his mouth. Likes it a bit too much and he fights the urge to rip Jeonghan’s shirt in two so he can reach more skin. “What happened to wanting to kill me?”

“Fucking’s - fucking’s easier,” he manages as Cheol finds one of his nipples beneath his t-shirt, pressing his tongue flat against it. His voice is high and breathless, thick with desire, and he sounds so goddamn good. “More, mm, productive use of my time.”

“Yeah?” He lifts his head to look up at Jeonghan, finding his eyes watching every move he makes. “Or maybe you just won’t admit that you’ve wanted to fuck me since you met me.”

He tries to laugh but it comes out clipped and choked when Seungcheol returns his attention to his nipple, closing his lips around it and sucking through the t-shirt. Christ, this is exactly what he wanted: Jeonghan's defenses down. No tough personas, no threats, no games. Just the two of them. "That's - that's rich."

Seungcheol sits up at that, straddling his hips, prepared to tell Jeonghan just how *wrong* he is about that. "I bet you've thought about me like this, haven't you? Mm, that's why you didn't give a shit when I saw you and Mingyu in the kitchen the other night. You *wanted* me to see you, didn't you?" He's walking a fine line, he knows; it's one thing for Jeonghan to submit to Mingyu, someone he's known for years, someone he trusts, but if Cheol pushes too far, asks too much of him and fucks this up - well that'll be it.

"So what if I di - ah!" He trails off into a moan as Cheol grinds his hips down against his, liking the way they rub against each other through their layers of clothing. "It - it obviously worked out the way I wanted it to."

"Did it?" He reaches out and wraps a hand around Jeonghan's throat. Like earlier his pulse skitters under his palm and then - and then his eyes harden.

Jeonghan moves quickly, freeing himself from Seungcheol's grasp, and just like that they're apart. Not touching. Just like that, Seungcheol ruined it. *Shit.* "Don't fucking touch me like that," Jeonghan rasps, on his feet, desire giving way to something closed-off as he looks at Cheol.

"I'm sorry," he says truthfully, standing slowly. "Shit, I'm - I'm sorry. I forgot and I… are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he snaps which means he's obviously not fine.

Seungcheol sighs, internally beating himself up because he wasn't careful enough. He'd almost had Jeonghan right where he wanted him, open and not scared and then he went and ruined it. "Are you sure? Because I heard what - what you said to Shua the other day and if you've been ra - "

"Don't say that fucking word," he hisses and Cheol wonders how he seems to be making it worse.

So he tries a different tactic. “Are you sure you’re okay? That you want to do this?”

Jeonghan groans, exasperated, and runs a hand down his face. “Christ, Seungcheol. I’m a big boy believe it or not. If I wasn’t fine with this I wouldn’t have let you touch me in the first place.”

Which is true. Jeonghan’s no stranger to telling Cheol exactly what he can and can’t do. But still. He’s worried he was too pushy, too insistent, that maybe Jeonghan felt like he had no choice but to allow the kiss and his touches. “You’d - you’ll tell me if I hurt you, right? Or if I make you uncomfortable?”

Jeonghan sighs and looks at him quietly for a few moments. His features soften and Cheol considers that a win. “You are unreal, Seungcheol. You’re - you’re not supposed to care about me; you’re supposed to hate me because of - of everything. Because I’ve threatened to kill you. Because I don’t trust you and I don’t like you. Because I put you down and I… God but here you are, postponing what’s bound to be an incredible hatefuck because you’re worried about me.”

“Of course I am,” and he’s a little surprised at the truth in his words. He knows Jeonghan’s right; there’s no real reason for him to be so concerned, but he *is*. “You’ve been hurt. You had a panic attack in front of me. What, I’m just supposed to forget about that so we can have sex?”

“Yeah,” he says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

It just rubs Seungcheol the wrong way. He sighs. “I might not like you but that doesn’t mean I want to hurt you. Especially not like this. Sex is supposed to be enjoyable for all parties.”

Jeonghan’s scoff is cruel and Cheol wishes he wouldn’t close himself off like this. “You sound like a textbook. I hope your dirty talk is better.”

“Jeonghan…”

“Seungcheol,” he mocks and it actually kind of hurts. Because Cheol’s just trying to help, to make sure that he’s okay. And Jeonghan’s treating him like… like some asshole he’d pick up at a club. “Look, if you’re not gonna fuck me I’ll go find someone who will.”

He has a pretty good idea of who that someone is and he tries not to think about Mingyu. “Does he know?” Cheol asks quietly.

Jeonghan hesitates, looking anywhere but at him. “No. Because it’s not important for him to know.”

Not important? So he’s been letting Mingyu touch him for almost a week now because it’s - it’s not important? “Christ - Jeonghan - “

“You know what, I don’t need this right now. Least of all from you.” He turns to leave but Seungcheol’s too stubborn; he doesn’t want to let him go. Not when he was so close. And definitely not like this, while he’s hurting and upset and trying so hard to keep his walls up.

So he reaches out, catches his wrist again, and pulls him close for a deep kiss. Jeonghan immediately melts under his touch, wrapping slender arms around his waist as Cheol cups his face in his hands. This time the kiss is softer, less urgent. More of a promise of trust between them than a desperate punishment. And when they break it Seungcheol meets his warm, dark gaze, stroking his thumbs along Jeonghan’s cheekbones.

“I want you, Jeonghan,” he murmurs. “You know I do. But I promised Joshua I would watch out for you, make sure you’re okay. That’s my job as your bodyguard and if I’m making you uncomfortable or scared during sex then I’m not doing what I'm supposed to.”

Jeonghan’s eyes search his face and he doesn’t speak for a few moments. But he doesn’t look as pissed as he did a while ago. “You’re not - making me feel like that,” he says finally and it comes out clipped, like it’s difficult for him to say. “Just touch me, Seungcheol. I’m fine. I promise I’ll say something, okay? Like I did when you choked me, you kinky bastard. Jesus, have I ever not told you how I felt about you?”

Seungcheol smirks. “You have.”

“Exactly. So please just shut up and fuck me.”

“Yes sir,” he whispers as he leans in for another kiss.

It doesn’t take long for them to get back into the swing of things: rough kisses and punishing touches and soon Cheol has Jeonghan right where he wants him again: whining, trembling, and all but begging. He’s pinned between Seungcheol and the nearest wall, breathing something about “fuck me *please”* in a high alto that leaves Cheol aching to be inside him. He pulls away from the new set of marks he’s been making along his delicate collarbones, Jeonghan’s shirt quickly discarded and forgotten about a while ago, and smirks at him.

“What was that, Jeonghan?”

He bites his lower lip, no doubt knowing exactly what that does to Seungcheol. “I want you to fuck me. Want you inside me. Please.”

Cheol runs his thumb along Han’s lower lip, tugging it out from beneath his teeth, and Jeonghan takes the digit into his mouth. Christ he’d love nothing more than to push Jeonghan to his knees and let him suck him off. But not right now. “I know, baby. I want that too but it’ll have to wait for next time. There’s no lube here and I’m not about to rely on pre-come and spit.” He removes his thumb from Jeonghan’s mouth for a hard kiss, one that only stokes the fire burning beneath his skin.

“What makes you think I’ll want you again after this?” Jeonghan asks when they pull away, breathless.

“You’re gonna be thinking about it,” Cheol whispers as he reaches out to palm him through his shorts and leggings. Jeonghan gasps at the contact and Seungcheol knows it’s not enough to sate the desire pooling in his eyes. “The way my cock would feel inside you. And you’re gonna want it, every hot, hard inch of me. You’re gonna want me to fill you up, want me to fuck you into the mattress the way I know you like.”

Jeonghan moans, high and needy, and it's really unfair that he manages to sound like that. So debauched and fucked out when Cheol's barely touched him at all. And he can't help but want *more.* Can't help but think about how Jeonghan would sound with his cock inside him. God he wishes they were somewhere a little different. Somewhere with a bed, lube, and condoms so he can do exactly what he's promising.

Next time, his brain swears and he holds onto that hope.

With deft hands Seungcheol starts tugging the rest of Jeonghan's clothes down. "This isn't gonna be enough for you - shit, it won't be enough for me either," he continues, loving what his words do to him. "I can't wait to have you, Jeonghan, be inside you. Can't wait to feel you around me, so hot and tight." He reaches for Han's hard cock and strokes his thumb over the tip. It comes back slick with pre-come and Cheol fights back a moan. "You're so wet, baby," he whispers. "What's got you so worked up, hmm?"

Jeonghan tries bucking his hips into Cheol's fist but Cheol holds him still. "Please Seungcheol," he whispers and he sounds so good like this. "I want - wanna come. Please touch me."

He lets go of Jeonghan to pull his own pants down and the increasingly appearing sadistic side of him fucking loves the way Jeonghan moans at the sight of his own cock. It's ridiculous in a dirty kind of way and he kisses Jeonghan again before taking both of them in one of his hands. Just like Jeonghan, Cheol's wet and aching for an orgasm. Honestly he's probably just as desperate as Jeonghan is, he just won't show it. But the way every single one of his cells craves release, craves Jeonghan, the way the fire in his gut burns hotter the moment they touch tells him that he's just as far gone as Jeonghan seems.

Cheol doesn't take his time; he's all but certain Jeonghan might kill him if he keeps teasing. That, and he really, *really* wants to come too. So he pumps them both quick and tight in his hand, building up an unforgiving rhythm. It leaves Jeonghan whining, moaning loud enough that Seungcheol wonders if anyone can hear them, if he should quiet him down. But he decides not to; let them hear. Let them hear the way he's making Yoon Jeonghan fall apart. He

grips Seungcheol's shoulders, nails digging through the t-shirt he still wears, scratching at his skin as he begs for more.

"Fuck, Hannie," and the nickname slips out before he can stop it. He buries his face in Jeonghan's neck, hand slick with their fluids, heat molten and burning in his belly, threatening to consume him. The slide of their cocks feels way too good, and he can't believe he waited this long for this. For Jeonghan. "Fuck, I love the way you moan. You look so good like this."

"I'm gonna - shit, Cheol I'm gonna - I'm gonna *come."*

"Yeah," he rasps, pulling back to watch, and a stab of pleasure, hot and heavy, goes straight to his cock when their eyes meet. "Yeah, come for me, Jeonghan."

He does, maybe five seconds before Seungcheol's orgasm hits, and he loves the way Jeonghan stills in his arms. The way he cries out, digs his nails into his skin, coats his hand with his warm, albeit sticky, release. And then Seungcheol's coming too, his whole body seizing up as the fire in his body burns beneath his skin.

Just like that, it's over.

Jeonghan pushes him back so he can move away from the wall, tugging his clothes on with shaking hands and a grimace. Cheol watches him with his own pants stuck around his thighs and both of their come on his hand, not really processing what Jeonghan's doing. It's not until he looks at him with that aloofness he always has that Cheol realizes what's happening.

"That was - nice," he says like he hadn't begged Seungcheol to fuck him. Like his voice isn't still thick with his desire.

But Cheol figures he shouldn't have expected anything different. They're not friends, not lovers, definitely not boyfriends. This was just stress relief. A game. And like the fool that he is, Seungcheol had willingly played. "Uh, sure. Yeah."

Jeonghan nods once and then heads for the locker rooms, leaving Seungcheol standing there partially naked with a sticky hand and trying to process everything that just happened. He knows he needs to call Jaesung or at the very least go wash his fucking hands. But he's too busy fighting the part of him that wants *more*. The part of him that wants to follow after Jeonghan and see how long it'd take for him to come a second time. Take him in his mouth and down his throat, give Jeonghan the best head of his life because he looks good when he loses himself.

Seungcheol tugs his pants back on with one hand, trying his best to ignore the sticky mess, and then wipes his other hand on the towel he'd brought out for sweat. He'll wash up and change when Jeonghan leaves because if he walks into those locker rooms right now he's touching him again. Jeonghan's back to his chest, hand on his cock, in front of a mirror so that Jeonghan can see the way he absolutely falls apart when Seungcheol touches him.

God, their little tryst did absolutely *nothing* to satiate his want, just like he knew it wouldn't. Because now that he's had a taste of Yoon Jeonghan he's only going to want more. And more. And more.

Somehow, Jeonghan got under his skin. And the worst part about it? Seungcheol doesn't hate it. Not in the slightest.

Notes for the Chapter:

FINALLY. these two are so dumb and horny i stg.

lmao y'all i was so exhausted writing this because this has been like 40,000 words in the making. but they finally did the do. sorta. and of course questions still remain. wtf is up with jaesung and byungchul goin HELLA m.i.a. for like a week? what will happen to jeongcheol now that they've had sexy times? what about mingyu?

tune in next time ~

thank you for reading. love you guys! <3

Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

oof so this last week has been really hard for me. covid depression set in and this fic got me fucked up but i've taken a few weeks off work and i've figured out where all this is going SO i'm back.

thank you all for your love and support! stay safe! <3

nine: dig deep into my heart

Ttukseom Park has always been one of Seungcheol's favorite places to go to, even back when he was a child and his mother would bring him out here on her days off. Yeah it's usually busy and full of kids and people but it's a *beautiful* park. Truth be told, probably the only good thing about meeting Byungchul and Jaesung in person is that they always want to come to Ttukseom. Even in the dead of winter with one foot of snow on the ground, they'd meet here. That was always less than ideal but at least today is a nice day. Spring warmth is starting to set in which means that Seungcheol is able to roll his sleeves up a bit - inadvertently showing off the tattoo on his right forearm. His first and only tattoo, gifted to him by Jaesung himself maybe forty-eight hours after he'd joined the gang. It's the same one they all have, in the same place too, and as he walks towards the meeting spot he looks at it.

According to Jaesung he'd had this tattoo idea in mind ever since high school. Growing up, he'd said, he was always intrigued by dragons. Liked what they symbolized, liked the way they looked. The inherent power they held. So when the time came for his and his best friend's fledgling gang to have their own tattoo, their own symbol to show the world who they were, Jaesung fell back on the one tattoo he'd always wanted: a dragon wrapped around the forearm, right below the elbow, tail in its mouth. Sort of inspired by the ouroboros snake, Cheol guesses? Jaesung said it represents eternity or something, and since dragons *also* symbolize intelligence and mythical powers (or whatever), apparently it seemed like the obvious choice for a gang tattoo.

It's definitely not what Seungcheol would've picked but he wasn't Sanghoon's right-hand man when they started the gang so. Well if he's being honest it's kind of cool. And he sort of likes the looks he gets from people when they see it. Like right now. The way their eyes latch onto it, the way they step back a bit or give him distance, like they *know.* It makes him feel powerful. Strong. For once Seungcheol starts to slip into his undercover persona, noticing the way his shoulders square back a bit, that he holds himself a bit taller; he *is* the big, bad bodyguard for the most dangerous man in Seoul and yeah, maybe he *should* be feared. And then he can't help but wonder if anyone actually finds him intimidating. If any of these strangers see him and think *shit, that's a scary dude.* He wonders if they'd think so if he were at Jeonghan's side. If the two of them really would be a force to reckon with.

"Seungcheol."

Jaesung's deep voice pulls him from his reverie and he glances to his left to find both he and Byungchul sitting on two benches with the backs pushed together. It's the classic meeting place and Cheol almost snorts at the absurdity of it. Their backs are to the other and Byungchul busies himself with his tablet while Jaesung looks up, peering at Cheol over the frames of his sunglasses. Immediately Seungcheol sits down beside him and envelopes his uncle in a one-armed hug with a quiet "samchon".

He gives them both a moment to settle in before he launches into a quiet, controlled rant, his anger finding its way to the surface quicker than he thought it would.

"Where the fuck have you two been?" he snaps softly, not caring that he really ought to have a more formal tone right now. "The last time I saw you, Jaesung, was four days ago and Jeonghan threatened to kill me and you just haven't contacted me at all. And the last time I heard from you, gwajangnim, was the same fucking day and you told me to just get over myself, basically, and push through everything."

"And you have," Byungchul barks, not looking up from his tablet. He looks rather inconspicuous in his "running" clothes, cap, and sunglasses, hiding most of his thin face.

Which is good because Seungcheol suddenly has the creeping desire to hit something. And he kind of hates that rounds and rounds of sparring (and one of sex) with Jeonghan a mere ninety minutes ago wasn't enough to quell the anger in his system. He feels like all he's been lately is angry. Angry and scared and it makes him seem like an outsider in his own body because he's never felt such negative emotions for so long before.

"Only because I've had to," he retorts, keeping his eyes on Jaesung like it's just the two of them having a conversation. "It definitely hasn't been easy, especially not when I've been doing everything blind and by myself." Fired up, unable to stop himself, he keeps going. "This was supposed to be an easy job, or so I was told almost a year ago when you first scouted me for it. I wasn't going to do much else than be in the room where it happened and then tell the NIS everything."

"What's changed?" Jaesung asks and his quiet tone is somehow more infuriating than Byungchul's attitude. It's too casual, too dismissive. Like he doesn't give a shit, and Seungcheol's a child pitching a fit because he isn't getting what he wants.

Am I?

"What do you mean?" he asks instead of snapping something.

"You're still the leader's bodyguard, right? And you said yourself that you and Jeonghan are getting closer and that he hasn't threatened you in a few days. So what's the problem?"

Immediately doubt seeps into his mind, replacing the fiery anger racing through his veins with something sluggish and cold that seems to weigh him down. Now he *definitely* feels like a bratty kid, being scolded for something stupid he knew he shouldn't have done. "I… the problem is, is that you guys need to stop doing that," he says a lot less confidently than he wanted. "Leaving me out of shit. You left me out of the plan to kill Sanghoon, you aren't comminucating with me and I'm sick of going through this blind. I-I don't even really know the plan from here on out, except that we're expecting Jeonghan and Song Yooseok to clash in some war that'll eventually leave them both dead. Right?"

Instead of responding directly, Byungchul gives him some vague bullshit. Like he tends to. "We haven't been keeping you updated because it wasn't important for us to - "

"That's basically what you said last time," Seungcheol huffs. "Just talk to me, for God's sake. Tell me the fucking plan so I can prepare for it."

"All you need to know," Jaesung cuts in with a stern voice that reminds Cheol too much of his father and he feels himself sinking back against the bench, despite himself, the way he did as a child, "is that your only job right now is to keep going. To keep feeding us information - which you stopped doing - and to not draw attention to yourself. As angry and raring to fight as he might be, Jeonghan knows they're not ready to face off against Yooseok yet. So the more you keep to the background the faster we'll get to that point and the faster he will die. Got it?"

"Yes, samchon," he murmurs, hating the way he feels right now, the way he felt as a child whenever he'd get in trouble and abeoji would yell and scream and scold him. He feels small and unimportant and it makes him sick.

"Good."

The three of them sit in silence for a few moments and Seungcheol's not certain if he's supposed to leave or not, if they're done. And then he remembers something, something he'd wanted to ask Jaesung about the last time they saw each other. Something he hasn't had time to really dwell on with everything else going on.

"Yooseok," he begins quietly, "was that your guys' idea? Did you two set Kyuwon up with him?"

They don't speak for what feels like several minutes, as Cheol figures they're trying to decide if they want to tell him the truth or not. Which, really, speaks volumes and he already knows the answer before Byungchul says it.

"Yes," he murmurs. "We are working with him, through Jaesung."

And even though he all but knew that, it's difficult for him to wrap his head around it. "So we, the NIS, are working with the second most notorious gangster in Seoul to take down the *first* most notorious gangster? Wouldn't it just be easier to - to raid the headquarters? Or Jeonghan's apartment, and just kill him that way? God, why all the secrecy, all the plans?"

"It can't come back to me," Jaesung says, "in any way. And if we just off Jeonghan in his apartment that leaves a power vacuum for someone else to take over. Someone else smart like Joshua who would assume that there is indeed a rat in their midst. And with Wonwoo's skills it wouldn't take long for them to figure out it was me."

"So the plan is to war with Yooseok and take out most everyone that way? And then, what, Song Yooseok will take their place?" He runs his fingers through his hair and groans. "I don't - that won't fix anything. Because Song Yooseok is more dangerous than Jeonghan or Joshua or even Sanghoon. He's more reckless, and giving him the power Jeonghan holds won't amount to anything good."

Jaesung scoffs and the sound makes Cheol want to sink against the bench even more. *I hate this I hate this I hate this I hate this.* "What are we supposed to do, Seungcheol? Eradicate all crime for the rest of time?"

"Of course not," Cheol huffs like a teenager, "that's impossible - "

"Exactly." Jaesung sighs. "Trust me, I'm not thrilled that Yooseok will be in the position he'll have. I've known him for a few decades and he's scarier than Sanghoon ever was. But this is the way things happen in the underworld, Seungcheol. It's a cycle; when one is gone, another immediately comes to take its place. You would know that firsthand if you'd stayed in Daegu with your father and I instead of coming here with your mother."

Seungcheol freezes at the mention of - of that. It takes him completely out of the present and he grips the seat of the bench, wood splinters embedding themselves in his fingers, as he remembers. Remembers eomma waking him up in the dead of night while abeoji and Jaesung had been out on a trip for a man Cheol never met until recently, a man his eomma hated. Remembers the way eomma drove through the night, like they were running from something.

Remembers the way eomma and abeoji used to fight, his mother yelling about Jaesung and a Yoon Sanghoon and "the shit they're getting you into, Jaehwan". Remembers how he would cry and cry because his father's anger was always loud and destructive. Remembers seeing Jaesung with bloody hands one night, the fear in his mother's eyes. Remembers all the little bad feelings and they come rushing back now, drowning him in fear, in doubt and insecurity, in breathless nightmares that left him shaking and sweating well into his years at the police university.

"What does that have to do with anything?" he manages in a dry, thick voice, staring at the grassy ground. In the distance, really a few yards away, he can hear the screaming laughter of children as they race around, the unintelligible conversations between their parents, soft murmurs exchanged between couples, obnoxiously loud teenagers as everyone enjoys their Saturday without a care in the world. Yet Seungcheol feels like he's beginning to suffocate. Sitting here with his boss and his uncle, the only two people in the world who really know who he is - yet they hardly know him at all - he feels so small. Scared. Like everything is suddenly too much.

Not for the first time since this all started he wants out.

"My point is, Seungcheol, you don't know what you're talking about." It's harsh, succinct - and true. Cheol's only been in this shit for half a decade, at the very most. A few childhood years repressed in trauma don't count and he takes a deep breath as Jaesung continues. "You don't know the way of things, you're still young and idealistic and think that life will work out exactly the way you want it to. Well newsflash, kid. It doesn't. Yes, we're getting rid of one danger but giving way to another because that's how this works. You can spend your whole life dedicated to ridding the world of these evils but you'll never make more than a dent. If you get that far."

Seungcheol just nods, can only nod, and he wants to leave. He can't be here anymore, not with Byungchul and his infuriating incompetence; not with Jaesung and his abrasive tone and reminders of the past. He just *can't* today.
"Are - are we done?" he whispers, feeling more and more like the child he knows he is to these two men.

"Yes," Byungchul says and it's enough to rouse Seungcheol from his seat.

But before he can finally leave Jaesung says his name and he stops. He refuses to turn around, instead catching sight of a mother and her two daughters. They're far enough away that Seungcheol can't hear them but he sees the way they play. The way the older of the children falls and the younger immediately swoops in to help her, to make sure she's okay. Right now their only worries are of toys or games, maybe school. They don't notice the way their mother seizes up in fear the moment her elder daughter falls. They don't notice anything outside of their own little world and Seungcheol remembers those days. Wishes he could go back to them.

Especially when Jaesung, almost too quietly to be heard over the joy in the park, says: "You'll be able to kill him, right? If all else fails and we need you to?"

He knows immediately who they're talking about, of course he does, and he thinks about Jeonghan. Jeonghan and his low voice. Jeonghan and his sad eyes and the power they hold. Jeonghan and his walls and his snark and the way he clung to Seungcheol when he came maybe an hour and a half ago. The way he's scared of fighting, of hurting someone, of watching a person die. How he cried when he found out his abuser was dead. The way he laughs when he thinks no one's looking. The adoring way in which he looks at his members, like they're all he has. Jeonghan, who he's supposed to hate because of who he is. Jeonghan who he *did* hate up until about - well, yesterday. How could Seungcheol hate someone like that, who's obviously struggling with fucking everything he's going through? He may not like Jeonghan, *definitely* doesn't like him but… but he doesn't hate him.

Can he kill him, though?

In just looking at his skills, yes. Even with everything Jeonghan's been taught, at his core he still hates fighting and killing. Seungcheol knows this and it would be so easy to take advantage of. To get him into a position where Cheol could put a bullet through his head or drive a knife into his heart. But *could* he? Could he wrestle the strength it would take to look that man in the eyes and separate him from his personas? Could he permanently take away the members' beloved leader and friend, Chan's cherished hyung?

Why doesn't he have an answer?

“Yes,” he mutters to Jaesung anyway, knowing it’ll get him away from here faster. Knowing it’s what he wants to hear. And with that he heads for his car.

This time as he makes his way through the park, cuts through friends and family and laughter, he looks down at his boots. This time he’s not some big, bad gangster. No, this time he’s a scared young man with too much asked of him. He’s too uncertain of himself, too afraid to actually ask himself the questions he needs to because somehow, after less than a week of Jeonghan being in his life, the responses to said questions are different than he thought. And it frightens him because none of this is going the way it was supposed to.

By the time he climbs inside his car he’s crying. Full-blown ugly crying, complete with sobs and snot and wracking breaths that leave him feeling empty and aching. He hasn’t cried like this in - in months. Not since that first night, waiting for Sanghoon to fall asleep, knowing that even with Jaesung and Byungchul around he was well and truly alone now. That everyone he knew thought he was a traitor, a criminal. That he was in the wolves’ den with no window as to when he would get out. *If* he would get out.

Like the child he is, he wants his eomma. Just like he did that night. But the narrative had to go far enough that his mother, his sweet, beautiful mother who risked her life just to get Seungcheol to safety, who worked harder than anyone he knows just to provide for him, needed to believe in it too. She needed to think he was who he pretended to be: a disloyal NIS agent who’d had enough, who said “fuck you” to everything she’d done and built for him and did the one thing she never wanted him to. The one thing he grew up swearing he would never do.

So instead he cries alone in his car, waits out this pain, this aching suffocation - and then he’s interrupted by an insistent buzzing in his pocket. Cheol wipes his eyes as he breathes deeply and then he frowns at the caller ID.

“Channie?” he asks as soon as he accepts the call, hating the obvious tears in his voice.

“Hyung? Have you been crying?” Chan, on the other hand, sounds perfectly fine despite being hungover. No panic, no tears, nothing clipped or dark on his end.

“Uh yeah.” He wipes at his eyes and cheeks again. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says with a heavy sigh. “Just that Jeonghannie-hyung promised me awhile ago that he would help me with my essay today and I don’t know where he is. Um, and I-I was wondering if maybe you wouldn’t… mind helping me?”

He can picture the look Chan would be giving him in person: wide brown eyes and pouty lips that make him seem younger than the twenty-two year old he is. As if he’d ever say no to Chan. “Yeah, I’ll help. Have you eaten yet?”

“Nope!”

“Should we get something for a late lunch?” he asks instead of trying to figure out where Jeonghan might be.

“Yes!” Chan chirps. “You’re the best, hyung!”

Help with the essay goes reasonably well, even with Chan’s hangover. Especially after Cheol gently kicks Vernon and Kwan out to help them focus better. The kid powers through it like a professional so when they finish Cheol decides to reward him by making him whatever he wants for dinner. Within reason, aka Cheol’s cooking skills. They settle on kimbap and Seungcheol gets to work while Chan sits on the counter, playing that new Animal Crossing game on the Nintendo Switch Jeonghan bought for him. The Nintendo Switch that probably wasn’t even a blip on Jeonghan’s credit card. Every few minutes he shows Seungcheol something with a delighted look and it’s only then that Seungcheol realizes how much better he feels. How much he actually adores Chan. There’s something infectious about his innocence; his innocence despite knowing what his brother and closest friends do for a

living; his innocence despite this life that works so hard to corrupt anything and everything in its path.

Chan is as much Seungcheol's brother as he is Jeonghan's, just minus the blood and family name. And he can't help but wonder if Chan sees him the same way too.

"Oh, hyung!" he says as Cheol finishes marinating the beef, and immediately shoves the console in his face. Seungcheol's met with a cutesy animated camping ground that he kinda wishes reminded him of his own childhood. "Look, I didn't show you - that's hyung's character!"

The scoff that leaves his lips does so on instinct; he turns to start grilling the beef. "No offense, Channie, but there's no way in hell Jeonghan plays Animal Crossing. I don't believe it."

"He does though! I mean he's been busy lately so he hasn't been able to play much but he definitely does! And he did when we were kids too. Before abeoji said he couldn't."

The statement is so inherently sad - that someone's father wouldn't let him play Animal Crossing as a kid - yet with everything Seungcheol knows about their family dynamic, he believes it. "I mean I guess that's one way for a big, bad gang boss to relax in his spare time."

"Hyung isn't *that* scary," Chan huffs. "Not as scary as abeoji. Or even Jaesung-hyung."

His voice grows softer and Seungcheol wonders just how much he's seen of this life. As far as he knows Sanghoon worked hard to protect him because he wanted his youngest (favored?) son to have every opportunity he could. And as far as he can tell, Jeonghan works hard for the same goal too. It's obvious how much Chan is loved by his hyungs, all of them, yet in Cheol's eyes sometimes it borders on sheltering. Keeping Chan from seeing just how bad things can be even though he's an adult who can handle it. Cheol just hopes it won't come back to bite them in the ass.

"You know who's scarier?" he asks to lighten the mood a bit.

“Wonwoo-hyung,” Chan immediately murmurs and the juxtaposition of his revered yet fearful tone and the thought of Wonwoo being considered scary by anyone is enough to make Seungcheol laugh. It’s a full-bodied laugh that Chan almost instantly joins and soon they’re cackling so hard that neither of them hears the front door open.

“Well well,” Jeonghan drawls from the entrance to the kitchen, causing Seungcheol to jump - which makes Chan giggle even harder. “What’s so funny?”

Cheol barely listens as Chan tries to regale his brother through laughter; instead his eyes are on Jeonghan. He looks too put together, especially for having a hangover. His bruises and cuts from yesterday - *Christ was that really just a day ago?* - are now mostly hidden behind makeup and his short hair has been styled, as best as it can, off his forehead. He’s in his usual black get-up, wearing that usual smirk, and it’s not fair how everything about him makes Seungcheol’s stomach flip. He shouldn’t want him, doesn’t *want* to want him, but here he is - craving Jeonghan’s touch in his kitchen. With Chan right there.

And if Jeonghan notices, he doesn’t say a word. In fact he’s not even looking at Seungcheol. He just laughs at Chan’s story and then walks over to the stove to see what’s cooking. And underneath the musty scent of his cologne Cheol catches something sharper, a lot more bitter. He smells like *sex* and immediately a stab of jealousy makes its way through Cheol’s body. At this point it’s been more than six hours since they fucked and in that case all of their fluids landed on Seungcheol’s skin. So there’s no way Jeonghan smells like sex because of him.

He tries not to think about him seeing Mingyu after being with him. Tries not to think about him moaning for Mingyu the way he did for Cheol. Tries and fails because Yoon Jeonghan snuck in when he wasn’t looking and burrowed his way under his skin, in a matter of days. It pisses him off like it should have earlier and when he glances up at Jeonghan, standing maybe a few centimeters from him, he realizes he’s glaring.

Jeonghan raises a perfect, thin eyebrow at this, stretching out the scar running through it. “You okay?”

Like you actually care. And like I would actually tell you. So he decides to be passive-aggressive even though he's twenty-six years old and should be able to communicate like an adult. "How's Mingyu?"

A glance over at Chan shows Cheol that he's re-engrossed in his game at the bar a few feet away which means that for now they could talk quietly. If they wanted to. And going off the hard look in Jeonghan's eyes they won't get far.

"Do you have a problem with something, Seungcheol?"

His tone is too light, too casual, and Cheol tries to focus his attention on not burning the meat. "Do you think I do?"

Jeonghan scoffs. "I don't know what you're so upset about. Do you really think what we did had any meaning?"

Yes. No. I don't know. "You don't know what I'm - " He scoffs with a shake of his head. "We-we did - you know - "

"You mean you gave me a handjob?"

"Christ. Fine. And then you just - left and went and fucked Mingyu?"

He shrugs like it doesn't matter - *maybe it doesn't* - and for some reason that just pisses Cheol off more. "It's not a big deal, Seungcheol. That was a one time thing - "

"Was it?"

He looks up and their eyes meet. And suddenly he's very aware of how closely Jeonghan is standing next to him. How with one movement his chest would be against Cheol's back. He can feel his warm breath, can smell teakwood and semen, could reach out and taste him if he wanted. If Chan weren't in the room, he probably would. Capture his mouth in a bruising kiss, hold him so tight because Jeonghan's like a drug to him. He's addicted and he *needs* him.

Jeonghan licks his lips, glances down at Cheol's mouth, and it's all Seungcheol can do to keep from pressing him against the counter and losing

himself in him.

And then:

“Hyungs?”

The spell is momentarily broken as Jeonghan turns his head to look at his brother, and Cheol likes the way his muscles work beneath his skin. Really wants to kiss his neck, even with Mingyu’s mark from yesterday staring him right in the face.

“I don’t wanna play these games anymore, Jeonghan.”

Where’s that guy, from this morning? The guy who didn’t want to take any of Jeonghan’s shit, who refused to join in his games because he knew what they would do to his head? Oh yeah. He’d ended up pinned beneath Jeonghan’s lithe body, worked up after rounds and rounds of sparring and arguing, so fucking tired of resisting what he’s been wanting. And now he’s back in that same spot. Chan leaves because he needs to charge his Switch - he heads out with a “tell me when dinner’s ready, hyungs!” - and before he can stop himself Seungcheol takes Jeonghan’s face in his hands and kisses him. Hard.

Jeonghan opens his mouth on a moan and Seungcheol slides his tongue over his, deepening the kiss. This time, though, neither of them draws blood and they kiss with a rough desperation, disregarding everything the way they had this morning. All the arguments and barbs they passed back and forth, all the fighting and the fact that they’re in the kitchen. Seungcheol ignores the way he feels, ignores how pissed off he was a few minutes ago because Jeonghan’s in his arms again, moaning into his mouth, clinging to him and he feels so goddamn good.

“You’re already getting hard,” Jeonghan whispers when they break the kiss, something dark and heavy in his eyes and Seungcheol’s stomach tightens hotly. “Want me that badly?”

“Shut up and get on the counter. We don’t have long.”

Jeonghan does as he says and then they're kissing again, all teeth and tongue and Seungcheol moans when Jeonghan bites his lip again. It's not hard enough to draw blood again but he kind of wishes he would. He spreads Han's legs and moves between them, reaching around to grab his ass and pull him close. Their clothed erections touch and they both groan, desire pooling in Cheol's belly.

"Fuck," he grunts, bracing his hands on the marble countertop, pulling back to meet Jeonghan's gaze. They shouldn't be doing this. Chan's in the house, Seungcheol's mad because Jeonghan fucked someone else. Really, he *shouldn't* be mad. He has no right to be. But he *is*.

"You're so sexy," Jeonghan whispers, wrapping his legs around Cheol's hips, effectively drawing him in closer again. With a soft noise in the back of his throat he noses at Cheol's jaw, lips brushing the skin. It sends shivers down his spine and he closes his eyes.

"So are you, angel."

He kisses down Cheol's neck and Cheol hates that he's won this round. Hates that he gave in so willingly, that he let Jeonghan get to him like this. But how could he not? Jeonghan is perfectly imperfect, the worst kind of paradox, and he's all Seungcheol wants. He grips his slender thighs and meets his heart-shaped lips in a breathless, barely-there kiss.

"Fuck me, Seungcheol," Jeonghan whispers against his mouth, sounding like sin. "After - after dinner. Fuck me."

And Cheol wants to. *Really* wants to. But Christ, he shouldn't. They shouldn't have even touched that first time. But they did and Seungcheol still wants him. He knows this is all a game to Jeonghan, with his guarded eyes and desperate touches, like he's scared he might lose Seungcheol before he has him but he refuses to even open up and let him in. Doesn't want to get hurt. And Seungcheol knows himself, knows he'd hurt Jeonghan. Even if he didn't want to. Because he *has* to. He's a NIS agent, Jeonghan's the man he's supposed to hate, take down, kill, and Cheol knows he's overthinking this, that he should just shut up and lose himself in Jeonghan. Detach himself and use Jeonghan the way he wants, let Jeonghan use him the way he wants.

But it's not that simple, it's *never* been that simple, and he knows it. From the first moment Cheol looked into those sad eyes of his he knew nothing about Jeonghan, nothing about *them* - if there even was a them - would be simple. Deep down he thinks Jeonghan knows it too. Yet he still acts the way he does. Still plays games to get into Seungcheol's head and Cheol doesn't know *why*. God this is all too confusing, too *much* and Seungcheol pulls back. Frees himself from Jeonghan's grasp. Meets his dark, confused eyes and shakes his head. "N - I can't. No."

He watches, in real time, as Jeonghan's walls go back up. His gaze immediately sharpens, hardens into something unreadable and he hops off the counter with a stoic face. "No?"

"We shouldn't be doing this," he says, as if Jeonghan asked for an explanation. "I - you're with someone and I - "

"What, Mingyu?" He scoffs but it sounds weak. "He and I are just… friends with benefits or something, okay?"

He thinks about the way Mingyu looks at Jeonghan, how gentle he is with him. His 'baby's and his soft smiles. "Does he know that?"

Jeonghan's pretty face twists up into a scowl. "What are you implying?"

What *is* he implying, indeed? "I just… I think that maybe you're leading him on." He keeps his voice quiet so that maybe Jeonghan won't get upset. "Even if you don't realize it. And I'm not getting between that. I mean you fucked him after fucking me and - and I-I just…"

Like he does, like he *always* does Jeonghan clams up. Shuts down. Even more than before. "Fine," he huffs. "Then this?" He motions between the two of them. "It's nothing. Finished. Don't touch me, don't kiss me - "

"I won't."

Jeonghan sighs and then brushes past him.

And for the second time in a day, Seungcheol watches Jeonghan walk away from him. For the second time in a day he wants to stop him. Wants to take back everything he said but he can't. Shouldn't. This is - this is best. Because if he lets Jeonghan in, if Jeonghan lets *him* in, he knows there's no going back. And he can't put Jeonghan through that, can't put himself through that. Not with the way this is all going to turn out.

Notes for the Chapter:

"don't let your dreams be dreams! just do it. it meaning jeonghan" - my sister, 2020

wow so they both have issues,, obvs. will they ever work things out? will cheol ever get over himself? also fun time with jaesung and byungchul, those two fuckers? yeah so stay tuned for next time (monday hopefully)!

#letjeonghanplaypocketcamp2020

Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you all so much for your continued love and support! 1200 hits is amazing and i literally couldn't have done it without you guys, so thank you!! <3

you know when i first started this it was gonna be very serious like a Grown Up Novel, seventeen and OCs only. and then my silly, multi-fandom ass came in and was like "how about no". i realized that this is a fanfic which means it can be as serious or not serious as i want it to be. SO with that being said we're gonna have a few more idol cameos (except daewon is an OC) and some wedding shenanigans in a bit bc who doesn't love wedding shenanigans. i mean the whole reason for wedding shenanigans was so i could put the boys in suits but retroactively it'll have an impact on the plot lmao.

tw: brief descriptions of anxiety, references to past paternal abuse, and i think that's it!

ten: lost & bitter

It takes twelve days for Jeonghan to have an actual conversation with him again. Not that Seungcheol's keeping count; he really honestly is not, not with how much has been happening the last almost two weeks. It's just every time he glances at the date on his phone he remembers. Twelve days since he told Jeonghan he wants him. Twelve days since their fuck in the training room. Twelve days since they both shut down and basically ended anything there was between them. Twelve days since Jeonghan said something to him that wasn't an insult or a snarky remark.

There's so much work to do - Cheol *really* needs to be sending weekly, if not daily, updates to Byungchul and Jaesung - but all he can think about is Jeonghan and it's starting to drive him insane. No one else gives a shit if they've noticed; they're all focused on their own work. Wonwoo's barely left his technological cave except on days when no one else can look after

Chan. Vernon and Jihoon have been gone just about every day on runs and jobs, collecting whatever supplies they can. Sometimes it's stuff to help in the impending war, sometimes it's stuff to keep revenue coming in. And then most of the others spend their free time down in the training room. Cheol's relentlessly sore, every goddamn day, because that's what he's been throwing himself into to try and get his mind off of everything: Jeonghan, Yooseok, his job, Jaesung. He spars with others and by himself, he trains, he learns. He bonds with the boys down there, finding it increasingly easy to laugh with them and his chest erupts in warmth whenever they call him 'hyung'.

In other words, it's getting harder and harder to snitch on them to Byungchul.

In twelve days, they get a lot done. Joshua's over almost every night doing work with Jeonghan and on nights when he's not there - well, Cheol hasn't seen Mingyu. Which is a bit surprising. On the tenth day of no communication between him and Jeonghan, staying up late to help Chan with another paper, he asked the younger Yoon if he'd heard anything.

He'd merely shrugged, squinting at his laptop screen. "I dunno. Wonwoo-hyung said something about Mingyu mentioning that he wasn't seeing hyung anymore. But I didn't push because I figured if hyung wanted me to know he would've told me."

"We shouldn't be doing this. I - you're with someone and I - "

"What, Mingyu? He and I are just… friends with benefits or something, okay?"

"Does he know that?"

"What are you implying?"

"I just… I think that maybe you're leading him on. Even if you don't realize it. And I'm not getting between that. I mean you fucked him after fucking me and - and I-I just…"

Seungcheol ran that part of the conversation through his head so many goddamn times after talking with Chan that he can't seem to forget it now.

And the fact that after he'd brought it up, said that they shouldn't be fucking around because of Mingyu's feelings, Jeonghan had most likely ended things with him? It meant *something* but Cheol couldn't figure it out and it was making him crazy.

Besides, it didn't matter. Couldn't matter. Nothing was going to happen between him and Jeonghan anyway. No matter how many times he lay awake at night, knowing that all that separated them were walls, physical and mental, wanting him more than he should; they couldn't be anything more than what they are now. Which is vague enemies kind of on the same side of a war. Well, as far as Jeonghan knows at least. And it doesn't help that *if* they've talked at all the last several days, it's been nothing but verbal blows meant to hurt, to wound. They've been at each other's throats, fighting and arguing in front of everyone else constantly. Fuck, maybe a week ago Seungcheol had recommended (at Jaesung's private demand) that they wait to go after Yooseok. It'd been a simple suggestion, one that he'd expected all of them to discuss, but Jeonghan had immediately shut him down.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

His voice had been cruel and sharp, a tone he only took up with Seungcheol; a tone Cheol couldn't get used to. It was like when Sanghoon had died, almost three weeks ago, and Jeonghan had regarded him with such visible hatred no matter what he'd said and did. They'd gotten away from that in the span of a few days, moved onto a simple, mutual dislike that was borne more out of professionalism than anything else, because if they'd continued the way they had been it would've resulted in someone's death at the other's hands, Cheol's sure of it. But now, after one conversation because Seungcheol had been *trying* to be a good guy, they're back at snapping and arguing.

"I spent two years taking pieces of shit like this guy down," Cheol had responded in a less than kind fashion, modeling his own tone after Jeonghan's. He didn't miss the way Jeonghan rolled his eyes and it only served to stoke the anger in his veins. The anger that called for either Jeonghan's head or his naked body pressed against Cheol's own. *"Spent four years at the country's most prestigious police academy learning how to do just that, too. So I think I* do *know what I'm talking about."*

Jeonghan's mirthless laugh filled the room and the others had shifted in their seats, no doubt sick and tired of this constant back and forth. But Cheol couldn't stop it, even if he'd wanted to. *"Oh, a whole two years!"* he'd said with sharp, narrowed eyes completely devoid of amusement. *"Christ. I've spent my entire life taking pieces of shit like that guy down. So why don't you shut* up*, Seungcheol."*

"Make me."

It'd come out before he could stop it and the fire in Jeonghan's eyes promised to burn him alive. But then Joshua had cut in with a soft but firm *"maybe Seungcheol has a point"* and Jeonghan had simply stormed out of the meeting.

Then the others had ganged up on Seungcheol (with the exception of Joshua who'd followed after his best friend) and demanded to know what had happened, why they couldn't be civil with each other anymore. To be honest, Cheol hadn't taken it personally. He knew how stressful their constant bickering must be for everyone so he just sighed, looking at his fingers as he drummed them on the glossy tabletop.

"I don't know."

Of course in reality he did know. They're punishing each other, and even themselves, for what they can't have. For making the other want what he doesn't. They're punishing each other to get a rise; to get the other to break. But it'd be difficult to explain their definitely bizarre power dynamics so he just feigned ignorance. Just brushed it off like he and Jeonghan simply hated the other, no real reason behind it.

Jaesung definitely didn't ask about it. Actually, like usual lately, Seungcheol hadn't seen much of him. He claimed to be busy either running some of the smaller day to day tasks at Jeonghan's behest or working on plans and shit with Song Yooseok, something that really didn't make Seungcheol feel comfortable. It feels like cheating, sitting in those meetings and asking Jeonghan to wait to exact his revenge while Yooseok was preparing to utterly destroy them behind the scenes. That the only reason Jaesung had been asking for time was to make sure Jeonghan would die. And then Seungcheol

remembers that this is his entire job: "cheating". Feeding information to Jaesung and Byungchul so they can take this fucking gang down.

But then Seokmin gives him those puppy eyes and calls him hyung. But then Soonyoung watches his every move down in the training room with awe in his gaze as Cheol teaches him how to fight like a cop. But then he and Joshua meet by chance in the kitchen at two a.m. almost every night, both with the intention of making coffee because they can't sleep and by now Joshua knows just how he takes it. But then Cheol's seven month mark comes around near Mingyu's birthday and he spends April sixth eating good food and getting tipsy on good soju, realizing that if he has any friends in the world now, they're all right there.

A realization that comes with a bit of shock because after seven months of being in this, he actually - actually *likes* these people. Likes being around them, talking with them. Would consider them to be his friends.

Well, most of them.

Suffice it to say, these last twelve days have been difficult. And with the look Jeonghan gives him this morning over breakfast, Seungcheol has the feeling that things are only about to get worse. Chan's already gone for the day - he has early classes Thursday and it's currently after nine - which means the only sounds filling the kitchen are those of Cheol and Jeonghan eating. Until Jeonghan pushes his plate away and fills the otherwise silent room with a heavy sigh.

"Pack a bag," he says and the fact that he's speaking without being prompted to by a nasty look or sarcastic comment from Cheol's end is enough to stun Cheol into not processing what's being said to him. "We're heading to Daegu later today."

In the quiet that follows Seungcheol finally registers his words - and his heart drops into his stomach. "Wh - wait, what? Why - what?"

Jeonghan sighs like a parent dealing with a child and it's so condescending but completely onbrand that Cheol lets it slide. "I have business in Daegu and as my bodyguard you'll be coming with me." He scowls then. "Trust

me, I'm not thrilled about it either but that's one reason why Joshua will be going too."

Truth be told spending time with Jeonghan is pretty much the farthest worry from his mind right now. Jeonghan or not, a trip to Daegu is already going to be fucking terrible. God he's gonna have to deal with all the - the shit from his past *and* Jeonghan too? Fuck no. He takes a bite of rice, swallows it, and then sighs. Tries to keep his voice from wavering when he speaks. "What's in Daegu?" *Besides a lot of shit I don't really want to face anymore.*

Jeonghan raises an eyebrow, the one with the scar through it. "If anyone should know, it's you."

Don't remind me. "Oh. So is uh - well, I know Jaehwan isn't still the-the head of the branch down there. Jaesung told me he died awhile back."

Jeonghan nods, though a smirk plays at his lips. "Jaehwan?" he queries with that smirk and Cheol really doesn't want to deal with this right now. "He was your father, wasn't he?"

So he does know. Of course he does; as far as Cheol remembers Jaehwan was Jaesung's only sibling that got into this shit. But still, the fact that Jeonghan knows that about him makes him feel uneasy and he sighs again. "Biologically, yes."

"I see. You didn't have a good relationship, I take it?"

"Why do you care?" he snaps, unable to help himself. They've spent the last two weeks or so at each other's throats, unable to say or do anything that isn't mean or passive-aggressive and here Jeonghan is asking him about his father? Trying to make conversation like they're friends or something?

He holds his hands up in defense, something clouded passing over his face. "Sorry, damn. I just - well, I can relate to shitty fathers so I thought I'd ask. But really, I already know. I may not have grown up down in Daegu but you know how close he and Jaesung were. And then with how close Jaesung and my own father were - well, I heard about Jaehwan a lot."

That was something Seungcheol never really considered: if things had aligned that way, Seungcheol might've known Jeonghan when they were children. If he'd grown up in Seoul instead of Daegu maybe they would've been friends, the only two kids of Sanghoon and one of his most trusted confidants. The beginnings of that next generation, the one Jeonghan leads now. But things *didn't* work out that way; Seungcheol got away from Daegu.

Guess I'm going back now.

"To answer the question you never got around to asking," Jeonghan says, "one of your cousins runs things down there. Your aunt Jaeyoung's eldest son, I believe. Daewon."

"So Jaesung told me when I joined." He sighs heavily, fatigue already settling in his bones because he doesn't wanna do this. Doesn't wanna go. He hasn't been in contact with that side of his family in about twenty years. "When's our flight?"

"Six forty-five, Incheon. Shua and Seokmin are meeting us here at four; Seok's dropping us off."

"And how long are we staying?"

"A week."

"Great," he huffs despite himself.

There's silence in the room again and he feels Jeonghan's eyes on him. When he looks up and meets his gaze, there's something soft there that Seungcheol hasn't seen in days. And he wonders what's going through Jeonghan's mind right now. If the sympathy in his eyes is real. Why it's even there to begin with. It makes Seungcheol uncomfortable and he gets up from the table, dishes in hand.

"Uh so I guess I'll go pack," he says before trying to rush to the sink and then his room as quickly as possible.

But he's stopped by a soft "Seungcheol". He turns around to find Jeonghan watching him from the table, that soft look still in his eyes, and it's unnerving. Just a couple days ago he looked ready to kill Seungcheol where he stood and now… now he's like this. Quiet and hesitating, like he can't quite figure out what to say. Cheol has no idea what to make of it so he just stands silently, holding his dishes in his hands, waiting for Jeonghan to say what he wants.

He opens his mouth and closes it a couple times before finally murmuring, "Thank you."

"For what?" Seungcheol asks immediately. "I - you okay, Jeonghan? Are you sick or something?"

Proving him wrong Jeonghan rolls his eyes and stands from the table too, dishes in hand. "Hardly. I just - fuck, I know this isn't gonna be easy for you so I just wanted to - to thank you. That's it. What, I can't be nice?"

"Not after you've been treating me like shit for about two weeks now."

Here we go again.

Except Jeonghan doesn't react the way he's expecting. No, he just sighs and glances around like a lost puppy for a few moments. Maybe he *is* sick. "I know," and his voice is quiet. "I… maybe I'm sorry about that."

Jesus. To be honest, Seungcheol's been certain that the word "sorry" isn't in Jeonghan's vocabulary. But apparently it is. "Are you really?"

He meets his gaze with those sad, pretty eyes and Seungcheol hates that he wants to comfort whatever seems to be bothering him. "I'm just - I'm stressing out, okay? And I know you will be too so I just - can we call a truce, or something? Just while we're down in Daegu? When we return we can go back to hating each other and fighting over everything but I just - I can't deal with that this week. Okay?"

"Okay," Seungcheol agrees. "I can't deal with that this week either."

“I know.”

They set their dishes in the sink, very blatantly avoiding each other’s hands, and then they’re off to their rooms. Cheol locks his door behind him and then leans against it, closing his eyes.

So out of nowhere Jeonghan offered a truce, which means they’re friends now? Or at the very least they can be civil towards each other. Probably. Hopefully. Because Cheol wants to keep this week as stress-free as possible, and Jeonghan does too apparently. And with Joshua there too, maybe things won’t be as bad as he’s expecting.

Except for what remains of his father’s family. Cheol’s own family too, technically. Hopefully… hopefully he and Daewon and his other cousins will be able to get along too. Maybe it’s all gonna go well and there won’t be anything to worry about. But Cheol’s not really that naive. Jeonghan’s stressing for a reason, and Seungcheol isn’t certain why. What’s in Daegu specifically; what’s so important that Jeonghan needs to go in person and bring his bodyguard *and* right-hand man with him as well? Cheol tries not to let that distract him as he packs, checking the weather beforehand so he can pack accordingly.

Maybe halfway through Seungcheol’s tearing out of his entire closet, Jeonghan knocks on the door. Cheol unlocks it with a sigh and is greeted with the sight of Jeonghan talking on the phone with someone. He assumes Joshua.

“What’s up?”

“You don’t - you don’t happen to own a suit, do you?” Jeonghan asks quietly and there’s a crackle of laughter on the phone that definitely sounds like Joshua.

“Uh… no. I don’t. Why?”

Still looking at him Jeonghan sighs into the phone. “He says he doesn’t - well okay you think Ki-hyung could get us one on such short notice?”

Seungcheol frowns at Jeonghan, who's now looking at nothing in his concentration. "Who's Ki and why the hell do I need a - "

"Ssh," Jeonghan hisses with his pointer finger to his lips.

If he's quiet Cheol can hear Joshua talking on the other line but he can't really make out any words even though Jeonghan's a few inches from him. Seungcheol takes this moment to just look at him. He isn't wearing any makeup today which means Cheol can see that cute little mole on his right cheek - wait. *Cute* little mole? What the fuck. Nothing about Jeonghan is cute. He's either devastatingly handsome or - well actually he's pretty much always handsome. Even when he's in Seungcheol face about whatever the fuck it is they fight over. And right now as he purses his lips while listening to Joshua, brows knitted, leaning against Seungcheol's doorframe in an oversized shirt that literally says "Gucci" on it and joggers, he's handsome. Bare-faced, hair just long enough to fall into his eyes, he's handsome.

But not the kind of handsome that makes Cheol wanna fuck him against the nearest wall. It's the kind of handsome that makes his heart hurt, the kind of handsome that makes him blush when Jeonghan meets his gaze - and much to Cheol's surprise, Jeonghan blushes too.

"Uh so we'll have to go suit shopping down in Daegu," he says.

"But why? What's going on in Daegu that's so suit-worthy?"

Whatever Seungcheol had been expecting - which honestly was nothing because gangs don't usually do fancy, suit-related things - he's not ready when Jeonghan gives a dreamy sigh. "A wedding," he says, and on the phone Joshua laughs.

"A we - " Cheol frowns. "So we're going to Daegu for a week for-for a wedding?"

Jeonghan fixes him with a look that's a lot more familiar than that sigh. "And business. The wedding is just a bonus."

"I see."

With that Jeonghan turns and makes his way back to his room, leaving Seungcheol feeling more confused than he had been ten minutes ago. But what else is new, really?

The closer they get to the flight the more stressed Seungcheol gets - not even Seokmin's loud, infectious laughter during the drive is enough to break him out of his seemingly never-ending anxious thoughts - and by the time the plane gets off he's gripping the armrests with white knuckles. At his own insistence he's sitting by the aisle, even though it's already starting to get dark so he wouldn't be able to see much anyway, and next to him Joshua sighs quietly. Jeonghan's in front of them but judging by the way his head is tilted he's probably trying to sleep (like he'd told them he would while they waited to board).

"Scared of flying?" Joshua asks softly, just loud enough to be heard over the hum of the plane.

"Um, n-not especially," Cheol stutters. He looks straight ahead, at the top of Jeonghan's head, because if he even glances at Joshua and sees out the window he's pretty certain he'll vomit. "I think it's just the stress of everything kind of, um, uh registering as something else. You know?"

Out of his peripheral he sees Joshua nod. "I get it. Hey, for what it's worth I'm sorry you're getting dragged to Daegu with us. I know you're not particularly excited to go - "

"What gave me away?" He tries to laugh but it comes out choked and strained.

There's a warm hand on his and he gathers the strength to look over. Joshua gives him a gentle smile and Cheol's not sure if they're close enough for this but he appreciates the comfort. "I'd be lying if I said you wouldn't have to deal with Daewon much. This *is* technically a business trip, even with the wedding and all, but he's not as bad as Jaehwan, or so I've been told. I think I met Jaehwan once before he died and uh…"

“Fun guy, wasn’t he?”

Joshua laughs and pats Seungcheol’s hand. “He, Sanghoon, and Jaesung definitely made quite the threesome that’s for sure. But I guess the ‘fun’ worked out for them: the gang wouldn’t be what it is today without them.”

“I know,” Cheol murmurs and as the plane levels out his anxiety starts to dissipate. But Joshua keeps his hand on his and Seungcheol kind of likes it. It reminds him of the way his mother would comfort him: quietly and at a bit of a distance but still there. As if giving him space if he needed it. “So why exactly are we going down there? I know business and wedding but - “

“Our gun contact is out for the wedding,” Shua says, “and she brought with her a whole shipment of arms, straight from the States. That, and Daewon wanted to meet with Jeonghan. He hasn’t met with any of the branch leaders since Sanghoon died so it’s a bit overdue. They’re just gonna go over logistics, especially when it comes to Yooseok, and make sure everything’s good down there. And then yes, the wedding.”

Cheol’s stomach churns at the mention of his cousin and any gang-related activities so he decides to focus on one thing. “So this wedding. I don’t know the bride and groom, do I?”

There’s a sparkle in Joshua’s eyes as he grins, and it makes him look wicked. “No bride, actually. Two grooms.”

“Uh… okay, unless I missed something gay marriage is still - “

His smile widens. “Technically yes it’s still illegal here in good old Korea but not in the U.S., where Kibum-hyung and Jinki-hyung initially tied the knot last week. But since none of us could go to that one they’re throwing a big ceremony down in Daegu. They actually live there and do work for the gang; Daewon launders money through Ki’s store and then Jinki’s family owns a club that Jaehwan frequented so, yeah.” His eyes sweep over Seungcheol and his grin softens. “Want me to tell you about them?”

Cheol hears what’s between the lines: *that way you can focus on something that isn’t your cousin?* And he nods, more grateful for Joshua's presence

right now than he thinks he's ever been. “Yes please.”

“All right, Cheol, settle in. Our story begins fifteen years ago…”

Seungcheol ends up accidentally falling asleep maybe twenty minutes in but the last thing he remembers is Joshua giving his hand a comforting squeeze. It leaves him with a warm, fuzzy feeling that doesn’t last when he’s shaken awake who knows how much later. He blinks sleep away, stretching as best he can before he looks up and catches Jeonghan’s gaze. He’s sitting backwards in his seat, looking sleepy himself, and he smirks.

“I wondered if you’d snore on an airplane,” he says.

Seungcheol groans softly and glances at Joshua. He’s dead asleep too and the world outside the window is pitch black, though he can make out soft points of light on the ground. “It’s my rhinitis,” he mumbles without thinking. Fuck his sleep-muddled brain and its lack of thoughts.

“Rhin - what?”

He looks back at Jeonghan with a sigh, heart tightening when Jeonghan rubs at his eyes, somehow managing to look incredibly soft and small with that one simple movement. “Rhinitis,” he says a bit louder. “It’s essentially chronic stuffy nose and for me it gets really bad at night. That’s why I snore.”

“Hmm.” For a moment he seems satisfied with Seungcheol’s response and then he sighs himself. “It’s annoying.”

“Well good thing you don’t sleep with me then.”

Christ. It slips out before his brain can register exactly what it’s doing but it’s enough to falter Jeonghan’s smirk. He glances around for a brief moment and then fixes Seungcheol with a scowl. *So much for our truce.* “Just - put your seatbelt on. And wake up Shua, will you? We’re landing soon.”

“Yes sir,” Seungcheol says with as much sarcasm as he can muster.

The flight attendant comes on the speakers to essentially give the same suggestion, just friendlier, and soon Seungcheol's back to where he was maybe three hours ago: gripping the armrests even when his fingers ache, because it's happening. He's back in Daegu after twenty years. After promising himself and his mother he'd never come back.

But there's a lot of promises he's made to himself and his mother that he's broken so what's another one?

His stomach churns as they exit the plane. His stomach churns as they collect their luggage, as they make their way through Daegu International, as he sees a figure that he wasn't expecting to be so familiar, since he hasn't seen Daewon since he was four years old. But it's really hard to forget a man like Choi Daewon. Even at seven, the last time Cheol saw him, he had the same arrogant air his uncles always had. He still has it now and Cheol imagines it's only gotten worse since he took over after Jaehwan's death a few years ago. According to Jaesung he'd been the only person to survive the Daegu "purge" led by that kid Hongjoong (who Cheol's never actually met) because he'd captured Sanghoon's favor as a boy. Seungcheol wonders if it has anything to do with the fact that Daewon would've been the son Sanghoon always wanted: smart, strong, confident, and gung-ho. Cheol remembers he and Daewon playing cops and gangsters at his family home, Daewon always choosing the gangster side because he wanted to be like his uncles.

He has his wish now.

As they approach he slides his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose - *it's fucking ten o'clock at night* - and smirks. He's unbelievably handsome, even with that stupid Choi nose, with what has to be the most perfect bone structure Cheol's ever seen. He's in some getup that would be ridiculous if Seungcheol wasn't used to it from Jeonghan: expensive clothes that would seem so out of place on anyone else but on him they work. Black hair slicked back off his forehead, eyes sharp and dark. He's tall, broad, and not disgustingly ripped - everything a young gang branch leader should look like.

And apparently he knows it too.

“Well well well,” he drawls as the three come to a stop in front of him. He glances between them before finally settling on Jeonghan. If he’s noticed Seungcheol or remembered who he is he doesn’t acknowledge him; no he only has eyes for Jeonghan.

And Jeonghan preens a bit under his gaze, biting his lip in that flirty way he’s shown to Seungcheol.

No fucking way.

“Welcome back, angel,” Daewon murmurs, voice low and throaty. “It’s been far too long, hasn’t it?”

Jeonghan shrugs demurely, somehow looking goddamn beautiful in his joggers and bare face and Seungcheol can’t believe what he’s seeing. Can’t believe the jealousy it makes him feel. Like he has any claim over Jeonghan at all. “You know. It’s kinda hard visiting people when you’re in prison for three years.”

Daewon grins. “You’re out now though, thankfully. We need you leading us in these difficult times, angel.”

And then comes Seungcheol’s saving grace: sweet, perfect Joshua. With an impatient huff he rolls his eyes, hands on his hips. Immediately the spell is broken as the two look at him and Seungcheol grins to himself. “Keep it in your pants, Daewon. I’m exhausted and I really wanna see my hotel room please.”

“It was maybe a three-hour flight,” Daewon snaps back.

But Joshua stands his ground, staring Daewon right in the eye. And Cheol thinks he sees Daewon sink into himself just a little bit. “You heard me.”

Seungcheol’s vindication is short-lived however because Daewon chooses that moment to look over at him. And his smirk returns, but this time it’s less flirty (thank God) and more wicked. Like he gets some kind of sick pleasure in seeing Seungcheol standing there. Knowing him and the family he comes from, he probably does.

“Look who it is,” he says. “The prodigal son.”

Seungcheol rolls his eyes despite himself, despite the churning knot in his stomach. “Nice to see you, Daewon.” *Not.*

“What, no ‘hyung’?” He even has the audacity to look offended, the bastard. But it disappears in Seungcheol’s silence, replaced by something that curls his lips cruelly. “I thought you were happy with the NIS, sachon. Why are you here?”

Good fucking question. “Do you really care?”

Daewon shrugs. “No. I just wanted to lord it over you. That bitch always said you’d never - “

The anger that invades Seungcheol’s body, turning his blood hot, making his hands shake, is bright and red and he barely resists the urge to punch Daewon’s handsome face in. “That *bitch,”* he hisses through gritted teeth, “is your aunt, my *mother,* and I won’t let you talk about her that way.”

His rage doesn’t have its desired effect though; Daewon just grins, completely unconcerned. Which only serves to piss Seungcheol off more. “Ah, you really haven’t changed have you, Seungcheol? I shouldn’t be surprised. You always were a little pu - “

“Daewon,” Jeonghan says in that soft yet firm way that never fails to get everyone’s attention. His face is unreadable, like usual lately, though Seungcheol doesn’t like the look in his dark eyes. It’s one he’s seen before, in an otherwise empty locker room with precome on his fingers, and he hates the way it’s directed at Daewon. “Why don’t we go to the hotel, hmm? We can catch up.”

Daewon’s car is some European sedan, no doubt expensive, and since the asshole was cocky enough to come to the airport unaccompanied there’s room for all four of them in it. Jeonghan takes the front seat where his thigh

is almost continuously groped by Daewon's hand, a sight that doesn't go unnoticed by Joshua either judging by his annoyed sigh.

"So I was thinking," he says as they drive through the streets of Daegu, Seungcheol trying his best to be glued to his phone so he doesn't have to watch his cousin's hand squeeze and stroke Jeonghan's thigh, "that maybe instead of three separate rooms, Han and I could share one."

The look Jeonghan gives him is dangerous but Joshua returns it in the same caliber. Obviously Jeonghan knows what his friend is trying to do and Seungcheol hopes to God it works because he doesn't want to have to listen to Daewon fucking Jeonghan all night.

"Uh, why?" Daewon asks, glancing back as he drives.

"I don't like sleeping alone."

Jeonghan scoffs. "You're a fucking liar, Joshua Hong. Besides, if you hate sleeping alone so much, go sleep with Seungcheol."

"No way. He snores too loud."

"Hey," Seungcheol says, his offense only half fake. "I snore at a normal volume."

"The whole plane could hear you, Seungcheol," Jeonghan says.

"Which is exactly why I don't wanna sleep in a room with him," Joshua says. And then he puts on the sweet face, one Cheol's seen him use with Seokmin many times. "Please, Han? It'll be like old times - we can stay up late talking and then I'll big spoon you the way you like. Please?"

Something goes unsaid as they meet eyes again and Seungcheol wonders if they're communicating telepathically. Maybe that comes with a best friendship like these two have. Either way, apparently Joshua's able to get his point across because Jeonghan sighs defeatedly.

"Fine."

“Thank you, Han!”

He just grumbles in return, putting his hand on Daewon’s to maneuver it off his thigh. Daewon gives him a look but it goes unnoticed as Jeonghan focuses his attention out the window.

Score one for me.

And then Seungcheol makes a mental note to thank Joshua later, though he imagines Joshua’s motives were more selfish than helping him out. It’s obvious he doesn’t like Daewon and Cheol wants to ask about it. Maybe they’ll find some time alone this week and they can talk. Because clearly Seungcheol isn’t the only one who has history with Daewon.

The Novotel Ambassador Hotel is probably one of the nicest in Daegu and it’s where they’ll be staying this week; they get three rooms back to back but like he said he would, Jeonghan stays with Joshua - and Seungcheol gets his own. It’s gorgeous, really, with an amazing view of the city but Seungcheol just closes the curtains with a huff. The fact of the matter is, he hates it here. Always has. Even the mention of the city name is enough to send his heart into a frenzied panic. It reminds him of yelling, of anger, of eomma crying. None of which he likes to think about.

And apparently, based off of his interaction with Daewon, none of his family will be excited or happy to see him. Which of course Seungcheol had expected but he’d hoped. Maybe naively. With a heavy sigh he flops onto the bed and grabs his phone. As usual, no notifications from Jaesung or Byungchul. Just some from Chan, sent to the group chat entitled “roomies” that they share with Jeonghan. It’s pictures of Wonwoo over at the apartment, sitting on the couch with his laptop and an untouched bowl of ramen next to him. His brows are knitted in concentration, bottom lip tucked under the top as he stares at his computer screen through his glasses.

“Hyung’s working hard,” Chan had texted, along with a *“we miss you, hyungs!”*

Hyungs, plural. That includes Cheol.

Of course it does. Chan loves you about as much as you love him.

He's about to type back a quick reply when Jeonghan texts something.

"Don't let Wonwoo-yah work too hard, and please stay safe, Channie."

The younger responds with an eye-rolling emoji and a *"yes hyung"* that Seungcheol can hear perfectly in his head. It's enough to bring a smile to his face and he texts back, telling Chan to listen to his hyung.

"Oh no, Cheol-hyung! Not you too. You're always the fun hyung."

"Sorry kiddo. We're just looking out for you. But when we get back I promise I'll let you win in all the Mario Kart tournaments you want."

"Yeah right, let me win. Even Wonwoo-hyung laughed at that."

Seungcheol grins and wishes Chan good night, tells him to tell Wonwoo the same, and then he puts his phone away. Even though he'd slept for the majority of the plane ride, tiredness still invades his bones. He blames it on the stress of being back here, but unfortunately he knows that no matter how hard he tries he probably won't fall asleep tonight. He's always had issues sleeping in unfamiliar places and now, knowing that tomorrow he'll have to face his family again for the first time in twenty years… well he's not very excited about that.

In the silence he hears Jeonghan laugh at something through the wall behind him. It's muffled but it still makes Seungcheol smile because he can actually picture it in his mind: the way Jeonghan throws his head back, the pure joy in his eyes. And Seungcheol wishes his rhinitis didn't make him snore because he'd text Joshua and ask if he could sleep in his room, too, vulnerability be damned. Because Shua might've been lying when he said he hates sleeping alone but Seungcheol isn't. No, he's always preferred having someone with him. His mom until he was too old. Then it'd been stuffed animals hidden under the covers because he was eleven and it was *embarrassing* to still be sleeping with a plush cat. During his enlistment he'd usually climb into his

bunkmates' beds, especially Doyoon's. They'd all been so young and homesick it hadn't mattered though. And then he and Doyoon actually enrolled at the police university together and with that came a shared dorm and two beds, one they never used. Especially when they started dating. But graduation brought a mutual break-up and with that Seungcheol was relegated to sleeping alone.

He remembers that first night alone in his new apartment. Starting his NIS job the next day and he couldn't sleep because it was his first time not holding anything close to him. He'd tried to convince himself that it was childish to need something to hold so he could fall asleep but he quickly learned that that's not the case. And now he wonders what it'd be like to sleep next to Jeonghan. According to Joshua he likes to be little spoon but Cheol hopes there's room in him to be big spoon sometimes. Not that it matters (it definitely doesn't) but he wants to snuggle back against him, feel Jeonghan's long, slim arms around his body, his face in Cheol's neck. He wants to get lost in his warmth in a different, non-sexual way. A way he's never thought about before and he immediately blames it on his loneliness.

It's hard dating as a NIS agent - he's suddenly bombarded with memories of failed dates, both with coworkers and people he met online - and then dating as an undercover operative? Try *impossible.* So maybe that's why he wants Jeonghan so badly, in a lot of ways. Because he's *lonely.* And Seungcheol has never done well with loneliness. He craves touch, craves human contact almost constantly. Hell, he'd snuggle with Joshua if Shua would let him.

Well, would he?

Or does he just want Jeonghan?

Rolling onto his side to flip off the lamp, suddenly shrouding his room in darkness, Seungcheol thinks about them. There's silence coming from the wall behind him and he wonders if they're asleep. He wonders what it's like to hold Jeonghan. To breathe him in. Obviously trust and being vulnerable don't come easy to him but Cheol wonders if Jeonghan would curl up in his arms. If he'd feel safe.

He hears Jeonghan at night sometimes, waking up from nightmares. It usually happens on nights when he and Shua are out drinking their coffee in the kitchen or when Jeonghan doesn't have any visitors. He doesn't scream, but he whimpers. It's very clear *"no"s* he utters, each one sounding increasingly frightened until Joshua sighs softly and takes his coffee with him to Jeonghan's room. And then those night when Jeonghan sleeps alone, Seungcheol lays in bed and listens, deciding it would be better to just pretend he doesn't know about these nightmares. So he lets Jeonghan get himself through them. Hears when he wakes up, breathing heavily. And sometimes? Sometimes Jeonghan cries. Only when he's by himself. When he thinks no one else is awake.

And that breaks Seungcheol's heart in a way he never thought Jeonghan could. But maybe yeah he'd feel safe in Cheol's arms. Maybe he hates sleeping alone too and that's why Mingyu always stayed the night, even though they were technically friends with benefits or whatever. Maybe that's why he'd agreed to share a room with Joshua because he knew Daewon wouldn't have stayed to snuggle him. No, Daewon's never been the snuggling type. To be honest though Seungcheol never really thought Jeonghan would be either. But here he is, fantasizing about it when he should be sleeping.

He closes his eyes, hating that this is really the only thing keeping his anxieties at bay. And again, he blames the loneliness. But it… it's not a bad thing, right? To think about Jeonghan like this? Especially if it's calming him down. Hell, maybe he'll actually get some sleep. Grabbing one of the pillows Cheol hugs it close and wishes, not for the first time in his life, that he wasn't so bad with feelings. Wishes he could accept the fact that he obviously doesn't hate Jeonghan. Because who wants to *snuggle* with someone they hate? It's a realization that should shock him to his core except that he's known for a while now that he doesn't hate Jeonghan anymore. Hasn't since his drunken, crying rant a couple weeks ago.

At their core, they're similar: two scared young men, trying to deal with the trauma their fathers had left them. And Seungcheol could never hate someone for that. He knows it's why Jeonghan is the way he is. He's been molded to be strong and tough, created in his father's cold, merciless image, but that's

not who Jeonghan is. And there has to be some kind of internal disparity there, between who he really is and who Sanghoon and Jaesung and the others would expect him to be. It's a disparity not lost on Seungcheol because it's one he struggles with too, albeit in a different way. Of course he could never truly tell Jeonghan about it but it's something he can hold onto in his mind. Something he can use to remind himself when Jeonghan starts getting on his last fucking nerve.

He's scared. Just like you.

"I'm just - I'm stressing out, okay? And I know you will be too so I just - can we call a truce, or something? Just while we're down in Daegu? When we return we can go back to hating each other and fighting over everything but I just - I can't deal with that this week. Okay?"

Maybe this trip will change them. Maybe when they return to Seoul they *won't* hate each other. Because here in Daegu, Jeonghan will definitely see Seungcheol the way Cheol has seen him: frightened, vulnerable, trying his best to just breathe when it's obvious he can't handle what's going on. And- and maybe that's for the best. It would be better for Chan and the others if they got along.

That's all. He just - just wants to be Jeonghan's friend, right?

Fuck, he shouldn't even want that. He's here to do a job. He's here to take down Jeonghan's gang, to feed the NIS information that will get him killed. There should be none of this, this pining, this want to be something more than antagonistic with Jeonghan. But goddammit there is. And it worries him.

With a heavy sigh Seungcheol rolls onto his stomach and tries to settle in for sleep he knows will not come, a whole new list of anxieties weighing his mind down.

Notes for the Chapter:

it's only now that i'm realizing i had jeonghan and chan dancing to shinee in an earlier chapter but that's okay lmao. we can just ~pretend~

as always, thank you guys so much for reading! feel free to drop a comment and i'll respond when i can. stay safe & healthy <3

Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

so with this almost 8k chapter (lmao are you guys even surprised at this point) i'm hitting 100k total words on ao3! wooo! thank you guys for your continued love and support, it's definitely appreciated!

tw: just a lot of emo, angsty insecurity.

enjoy! <3

eleven: gonna win this fight

A pounding on Seungcheol's door wakes him up sometime the next morning. With heavy, groggy arms he fumbles around on his bedside table for his phone to check the time. Already he figures it's too early because he can barely move without his body screaming at him to go back to sleep. But he guesses he won't get that luxury. According to his phone it's about seven-fifteen which means he got maybe six or seven hours (at the most) and he huffs a sigh as he gets out of bed, vaguely aware of the fact that he's in nothing but boxers, to see who the fuck is knocking on his door so aggressively.

Surprise, surprise it's Jeonghan. He's fully dressed and all made up, looking as professional as Cheol's ever seen him. But there's still a tiredness there. It settles on his shoulders as he meets Seungcheol's gaze.

"Did you *just* wake up?" he demands in a tight voice.

"Yeah because some asshole was pounding on my door," Seungcheol responds just as hard and Jeonghan huffs.

"We're gonna be late to our meeting with Daewon. Damn it."

Seungcheol lets himself be pushed into the room, watching as Jeonghan closes the door and moves towards his suitcase. Apparently Cheol isn't

moving fast enough because Jeonghan just unzips the bag and starts rifling through it. There's nothing embarrassing in there so Cheol lets him, because there's no getting through to Jeonghan when he's like this.

This. Stressed and freaking out and needing to control at least something. It doesn't bode well for the rest of the day and Seungcheol decides to just bite the bullet and start getting ready. He begins by heading into the bathroom to brush his teeth, leaving the door open for Jeonghan to scold him more if he feels he needs to. But it doesn't come. Toothbrush in mouth, Cheol leans against the doorframe and watches Jeonghan as he digs through his suitcase, not missing the way his delicate hands shake.

Great.

"You never told me we'd have an early meeting today," he mumbles around a mouth full of toothpaste and his toothbrush.

Jeonghan tugs out a few articles of clothing, setting them aside. "Yes I did, on the way to Incheon."

Cheol rolls his eyes, even though Jeonghan's back is to him. "Okay well I was lowkey panicking then. I barely remember the car ride at all." He turns back to the sink to spit and rinse out his mouth, pointedly ignoring the mess that must be his face in the mirror.

As he comes back to the main room Jeonghan stands up with some clothes in hand; Seungcheol recognizes them as the best things he brought: black slacks, a black, nondescript t-shirt, a black blazer. Honestly, just like Jeonghan's closet, most of Seungcheol's clothes are now monochromatic. Maybe it's just the unspoken uniform of gang life: black on black on black is definitely intimidating. Jeonghan thrusts the clothes into Cheol's arms and he accepts them with a sigh.

"Be ready in ten minutes," Jeonghan says and then with that he heads for the door.

Cheol can't help the worry that tugs at his heart. Jeonghan is obviously stressed - hell, he'd even said he would be before they left Seoul - and no

matter what he feels for him, no matter how confusing their relationship is he's not gonna let Jeonghan walk out that door with shaking hands and darting eyes that look to be on the precipice of a panic attack. He just *can't*. Besides, they're truced now, right? Which means they should care about each other or something, right? "Hey, wait."

Jeonghan turns around and looks at him with those tired eyes, fingers tugging at a loose string on his jeans. He winds it around one long, thin finger. "What? You need to get ready and - "

"Are you okay?"

Seungcheol's not sure what it is that catches Jeonghan off guard: maybe it's his soft tone or even the unexpected question itself. But either way Jeonghan glances down at the carpeted floor and tugs so hard at that string that it snaps off his pants. There's a moment where Seungcheol thinks he might let him in, at least halfway, and say something. They've come that far, haven't they?

Maybe we did before you fucked it up.

When Jeonghan looks up at him again his eyes are dark and guarded, finger starting to turn unnatural shades of red and purple. "Yeah. I'm perfectly fine."

"No you're not."

And before his brain can catch up with his body he's crossing the room to Jeonghan, clothes abandoned on the floor. Immediately he reaches for his hand - which Jeonghan surrenders quietly, without a fuss (it's another red flag) - and begins to unwind the black string from his finger. Jeonghan stays still, barely even breathing, and once his finger is free Seungcheol strokes his thumb along the indents the string left. They look like scars, red and angry amongst ivory skin, like they don't belong there, and when Seungcheol lifts his head Jeonghan's eyes are closed. It's only then he realizes how close they're standing, that this is the closest they've been in thirteen days, and Seungcheol can't help himself. He slides his fingers between Jeonghan's, effectively intwining their hands. And then surprising him, Jeonghan steps

towards him, closing the distance between them until there's only a few centimeters left.

He tried his best not to pay attention to it the last couple weeks but he's been *aching* to be close to Jeonghan since the moment they last parted. Something - *everything* - about him had gotten under Seungcheol's skin to the point where he feels like he can finally breathe for the first time in days. And it should scare him. He should pull away and put as much distance between them as he can but he *can't.*

"Jeonghan," he murmurs, and Jeonghan licks his lips, eyes still closed. "What are you so str - "

"Don't," he whispers and Seungcheol feels his warm breath on his face. Fuck, it's been so long and he winds an arm around his trim waist, liking the way Jeonghan presses against him. "Just - just don't."

For a few moments neither of them moves; they just stand like this in each other's presence. It'd be enough if not for every cell in Seungcheol's body crying out for Jeonghan. Needing him like he needs oxygen. And when their lips meet, it's electric. Something comes alive deep inside Seungcheol and he pulls Jeonghan even closer, wanting more than he should. Han ends up with his legs wrapped around Seungcheol's hips, tongues coiling, hands roaming as they tug at clothes or brush against bare skin. It's not as intense as their first kiss nor even their last; it's slow and deep and somehow everything Cheol's been missing. Sparks ignite beneath his skin where he feels Jeonghan's fingers brush his collarbones and he grips those slender thighs in his hands, desire hot in his gut as Jeonghan moans.

When they finally break the kiss, they're both breathing heavily - but Jeonghan's looking at him. Any tiredness that was there is now gone, replaced by something deep and contemplative. Sharp eyes that seem to catalogue his every movement and it makes him *hot.* Seungcheol squeezes his thighs and Jeonghan steadies himself with a hand on Cheol's shoulder. But he makes no moves to get down, to remove himself from Seungcheol's hold. Fuck, aren't they late or something already? Unless Jeonghan wants to say fuck it. And if he does, Seungcheol will *definitely* agree. Daewon and the rest of Daegu can wait because this is all he wants.

“Set me down,” Jeonghan whispers finally as he leans in to brush kisses against Cheol’s jaw and for a moment his heart drops. But then Jeonghan murmurs “on the bed” and Cheol does as he’s told, no hesitation.

God, Jeonghan looks good like this, a soft blush dusting his cheeks, bottom lip tugged under his teeth, eyes black with lust. It’s a look Seungcheol will *never* tire of and he looms over Jeonghan with a knee on the bed, wanting nothing more than to take his time and show Jeonghan just how much he wants him. And then Jeonghan’s hands move to his own jeans and he starts unbuttoning them.

“I don’t - I don’t have anything,” Cheol stutters like an idiot instead of taking charge and undressing Jeonghan, feeling his soft skin under his fingertips.

“Just touch me like last time,” Jeonghan responds, already having succeeded in tugging his jeans down his thighs. His phone ends up on the bedside table. “And then I’ll get you off too if you want. I just - I need it.”

His words make Seungcheol stop because of course Jeonghan’s letting him touch him. He’s stressed out of his mind and there’s nothing like a good orgasm to clear some worries away, for at least a few minutes. But once again he’ll touch Jeonghan with no emotions, no strings attached. Once again he’ll watch Jeonghan come in his hand, the sounds of his gasps and moans, the image of him breathless and wanting and vulnerable like this seared into his mind, a vivid memory stored with the sole intention of teasing him, mocking him. Except Jeonghan’s not quite vulnerable right now, is he? There’s something cautious in his eyes and Seungcheol hadn’t noticed it last time because he’d been too ready to lose himself in him. But now he sees it and he knows what he is to Jeonghan: a means to an end. A quick fuck meant to distract him from his stresses.

Seungcheol shouldn’t. He ought to put a stop to this now but then Jeonghan pulls his boxers down and it’s all he can do to not reach out and touch him.

“We don’t have much time,” Jeonghan says even though Cheol hasn’t spoken in at least half a minute. “So if you’re gonna get me off, do it fast.”

Fuck, he'd be stupid not to and the promise of Jeonghan hard and moaning at his touch is enough to spring him into action. He leans over him, bracing himself with his hands on the mattress, and captures his mouth in a kiss. It's quickly broken the moment he wraps his fingers around Jeonghan's cock, and he loves the moan that leaves his lips.

"You sound so good, angel," he whispers, shifting to kiss his neck. The unblemished expanse of Jeonghan's skin is so tempting but Cheol decides to be good; he'll make marks where no one can see them.

"Please," Jeonghan whines, already sounding so fucked out, and it goes straight to Cheol's own cock. "Don't go slow. I-I need to come, Seungcheol please."

"But what if I want to?" He leans in to nip at Jeonghan's earlobe, keeping his strokes slow and steady, fist just loose enough that it'll only make Jeonghan that much more desperate for his touch.

Honestly he's not sure why they fall into these roles like this. Maybe for Jeonghan it's the thrill of submitting when he's normally so in control, in charge. For Seungcheol… well he gets a kick out of the power dynamic. He tends to be more dominating in bed anyway but with Jeonghan, there's something about him that makes Cheol want to *ruin* him. Especially when he's like this: soft and whiny and pliant. Cheol tightens his fist, Jeonghan's cock twitching in his grasp as he whines.

"Goddamn it, Seungcheol. I'm gonna fucking - "

He strokes his thumb over the tip of Jeonghan's cock, smearing pre-come around the head, and Jeonghan trails off into a broken moan. It leaves Seungcheol with some sick sense of pride, knowing he can make Jeonghan react like this. "What was that, angel?"

When their eyes meet Jeonghan looks ready to kill him if he doesn't get serious and let him come the way he wants. But Cheol isn't giving in so easily. He's not sure when he'll get to have Jeonghan like this again - *if,* really - and he wants to savor it. So he leans in and captures Jeonghan's mouth in a hard kiss. It lasts for a few seconds before he pulls away again,

flicking his wrist on an upstroke. Jeonghan bites back his noises and looks up at Seungcheol. There's fire in his eyes, defiance as dark as the lust Cheol sees, yet he still submits like this. Still *trusts* Seungcheol not to hurt him.

It shouldn't do things to him, but it does.

"You'll come when I say you can," he whispers. "Got it, angel?"

Jeonghan nods, biting his lip.

And then they really begin.

At first Seungcheol keeps his strokes slow and shallow as he focuses his attention on pressing kisses along Jeonghan's neck and jaw. And Jeonghan stays quiet, back arching, hands scrambling for purchase on either the sheets or Cheol's body. But it's not enough. Seungcheol *needs* him, needs his sounds and his body and his beautiful fucking voice. So he speeds up, tightens his fist, strokes along the most sensitive parts of him, and soon Jeonghan's falling apart beneath him.

"Seungcheol," he whispers, eyes closed, sweat gathering along his temples. He grips the hotel sheets with white knuckles, bucks his hips to chase the release Cheol won't give him, and fuck he's never been more beautiful. It sends hot stabs of pleasure straight to Cheol's own cock, which stays untouched behind his boxers. For now. "S-Seungcheol, I…"

"I know, angel." He brushes gentle kisses along his jawline, and it's definitely been more than ten minutes but there's no way they're stopping now. Not even if Daewon himself came pounding on the fucking door would Seungcheol pull away. Honestly he's not even sure he *can.* Jeonghan's like a drug, one he thought he was strong enough to resist. He should've known there would be no going back. "You're doing so well for me, Jeonghan, so good. You wanna come, don't you?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm so close, Cheol please."

Seungcheol can't help but shiver at the high whine in Jeonghan's voice, at the sound of him begging, and he really wants to be inside him. "You can come,

Hannie, but only when I say so. Okay?"

Jeonghan nods, licks his lips, and opens his eyes. They fall right on Seungcheol and suddenly he's very aware, again, of his own erection, hard and aching beneath his boxers. But this isn't about him right now. No, this is about Jeonghan and his pleasure. Getting him off to relieve the stress he feels. It's foolish to think this is anything else on a deeper level and Seungcheol knows what his role is. He'll make Jeonghan come and then he'll be discarded like a toy fulfilling its use. A use he, strangely, has no qualms with because it's led him here: hand around Yoon Jeonghan's cock, watching him come undone beneath him.

It takes a few more strokes until Cheol deems him ready enough and he whispers, "come for me angel," against his lips. He draws back to watch, something he wasn't really able to do last time, and finds that even the act of simply seeing Yoon Jeonghan orgasm is euphoric in and of itself. He's so beautiful, the way his body seizes up; he arches back against the sheets, hair splayed out on the white pillow, sweat on his skin as he lets out a breathless moan. He spills onto Seungcheol's hand, the same hand that pumps him through it until he's begging in a trembling voice to "s-stop Cheol, please, I-I'm - it hurts, *please."*

Seungcheol sits back on his knees as he releases him, trying to ignore the hard, aching thing beneath his boxers, the ball of heat curling in his belly, and surveys his work. Fuck, if this is how Jeonghan looks after a simple handjob Cheol can't even begin to imagine how fucked out he'll be after having Cheol inside him. Christ. He meets Seungcheol's gaze with dark, heavy-lidded eyes. And this time, he makes no move to leave. He doesn't utter some comment about what they just did, he doesn't scramble to get his clothes back on properly. He just lays there and *looks* at Seungcheol. It's a bit unnerving to say the least and Cheol isn't sure what he's supposed to do now. What his place is. He's fulfilled his use so why is he allowed to stay? It gives him false hope, a false hope that mingles with the heat in his blood and bones, a false hope that aches for more.

"Seungcheol," Jeonghan whispers, sounding like sin, and he reaches a delicate hand out towards him. Palms his cock through his boxers and Cheol

moans because *holy shit* he wants Jeonghan's mouth on him so bad. "Let me get you off."

Something in the back of his mind convinces him that if he comes too, that's it. The spell will be broken and Jeonghan will no longer be his, lost as quickly as he'd had him. So, surprising himself, Seungcheol reaches for Jeonghan's hand and brings it up to his mouth. He brushes kisses along his knuckles, his palm, his wrist. And Jeonghan watches his every movement with dark eyes. "Later. I'm not done with you, angel."

"It'll be awhile before I can come again," he sighs, running his thumb along Seungcheol's lips. "I mean, I guess you could go into mine and Shua's room and get the stuff I brought but - "

"I'm not going in there in just my boxers with this boner. I'm not *that* masochistic."

Jeonghan smiles, actually *smiles,* and stretches out his legs. "Then what do you suggest we do, Seungcheol? We're already late for our meeting - actually Shua ought to be coming to get us soon. I'm surprised he hasn't yet…"

He gives Jeonghan's palm one last kiss before he lets go to slide off the bed and clean up.. "Maybe he heard you moaning like a porn star and decided to stay away." The sound of Jeonghan's offended gasp is a bit muffled from the bathroom and when Cheol comes back out, towels in hand, he finds Jeonghan sitting up with the most indignant look on his pretty face. His pants and underwear have found their way to the floor, joining Seungcheol's own discarded clothes, leaving him in just a black button-down. Hair mussed, lips swollen and kiss-bitten, skin flushed and dusted with a light sheen of sweat - God he looks so fucking good.

"I don't moan like a porn star, you asshole."

"You really do," Cheol murmurs as he wipes his one hand clean. And then he kneels on the bed to take care of Jeonghan. He's gentle as he cleans the come from his cock and stomach, liking the little noises Jeonghan makes in his post-orgasm sensitivity. "It's hot though. Incredibly hot."

“Fine,” Jeonghan huffs, a soft blush on his cheeks. He lays back down as Seungcheol tosses the towels onto the floor - he’ll pick them up later - and then there’s an angry vibration coming from somewhere near the bedside table. It’s Jeonghan’s phone, no doubt either Joshua or Daewon calling to be like “hey, where the fuck are you?” and he answers the call with a sigh. “Hey, Daewon.”

Cheol resists the urge to groan and instead channels his energy into ridding Jeonghan of his shirt. He undoes each button slowly and then kisses every inch of newly exposed skin. Already Jeonghan’s breathing starts to stutter - he’s so goddamn sensitive - and Cheol braves a look up at him. He’s got his phone pressed to his ear, desire pooling dark and hot in his eyes.

“Don’t,” he mouths. But he bites his lip in that way Seungcheol can’t resist so he decides to play his little game.

This’ll be fun.

“I’m sorry, Daewon,” Jeonghan says into the phone. “I - yeah, I know, but Seungcheol’s sick or something, I don’t - “

He can vaguely hear Daewon replying - he sounds kind of mad - but Cheol doesn’t actually give a shit, so he unbuttons Jeonghan’s shirt enough to expose his chest. And then, with a wicked smirk, he leans down and swipes his tongue against one of his nipples.

Jeonghan tenses under his body, breath hitching in his throat, and he reaches out a hand. Instead of pushing him away, though, said hand merely slides into his hair and tangles in Cheol’s locks. A glance up at him confirms what Cheol was hoping for: Jeonghan wants him to keep going. So he does. He licks and sucks and even bites at Jeonghan’s nipples while he gives some bullshit excuse to Daewon about the meeting, loving the way Jeonghan’s fingers curl in his hair, blunt nails scratching at his scalp. And already he can feel Jeonghan’s cock stirring against his stomach - *wouldn’t get hard again, my ass* - and this entire morning feels like a goddamn dream.

“I’m sorry, Daewon,” Jeonghan says again, voice strained as he tries to keep it sounding normal. But it’s a losing battle and soon Seungcheol will have

him right back where he wants him: all to himself. "We can meet later though. Sure, over dinner." He pauses, listening to Daewon's response, and Cheol takes this moment to kiss his way down Jeonghan's lean stomach. "Well yeah, Seungcheol would come. He's my bodyguard, I can't just - "

Is Daewon jealous?

Cheol reaches Jeonghan's half-hard cock and teases it with kisses. Jeonghan has to cover his mouth to keep quiet and Seungcheol's own cock strains against his boxers, angry and begging to be touched. But he doesn't give in, doesn't ask Jeonghan to get him off because he doesn't really care right now. If this is the last time he'll get to have Jeonghan like this, he's taking advantage of it. He wants to memorize every inch of his body, commit to memory every sound, the way his muscles jump and twitch under his touch. The way he looks when his walls are somewhat down. This is the most vulnerable he's ever seen Jeonghan and the stubborn part of Seungcheol refuses to let him go.

So he worships him.

It doesn't take long for Jeonghan's cock to reach full hardness again and then Seungcheol takes him in his mouth. He relaxes his jaw and throat - Jeonghan's not necessarily big, just kinda long - so he can take every inch of him. And the moment the tip of Jeonghan's cock touches the back of his throat, pubic hairs tickling his nose, Jeonghan lets out a sharp moan.

Still on the phone with Daewon.

The blush on his cheeks and chest only grows and he quickly hisses a "call you back" into the phone before ending the call. "Seungcheol," he whines and it's fucking music to his ears. "I-I can't - I can't come again…"

Why not? he wants to ask. *You're hard again.* But he doesn't - well, can't - say anything. Just slowly pulls off his length until only the head is between his lips, and he meets Jeonghan's dark gaze. Holds it as he sinks back down slowly, taking him in all the way again. His throat aches already, lungs beginning to burn as he breathes in harshly through his nose, but he likes it. Likes the way Jeonghan falls apart, with his dick down Seungcheol's throat.

If his first orgasm came on quickly, the second happens even faster and this time Seungcheol swallows it all, eyes never leaving Jeonghan's perfect, trembling body. When he comes back up Cheol wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and catches Jeonghan's gaze. His eyes are lidded but in a different, more tired way and Seungcheol suddenly remembers the lack of sleep they *both* got last night, as fatigue settles in his body like stones. He reaches out to stroke at Jeonghan's cheekbone, smiling softly when his eyes flutter shut.

"You should sleep," he murmurs, liking how rough his voice sounds now. It's pretty damn hot and it does nothing to quell the erection that sits hard and heavy still in his boxers. He'll take care of it in a bit but right now he wants to be with Jeonghan. Wants to be with him like *this:* soft and tired. Vulnerable.

"There's so much to do," Jeonghan whispers in response, yet his eyes remain closed as he turns to burrow his face in Cheol's hand. He noses at the lines on his palm and it's so achingly intimate that Seungcheol doesn't know what to make of it. But he likes it. "I can't rest."

"Yes you can, angel. The world isn't gonna stop just because you sleep for a few extra hours." He leans down to kiss his forehead and Jeonghan's hand gently grasps at his wrist, like he knows Cheol plans on leaving him for a few minutes.

"Stay," he breathes.

Cheol brushes kisses down the bridge of his nose to the tip. "I'll be back soon, Hannie. Promise. I just have to take care of something first."

Jeonghan smiles sleepily. "Oh. Yeah, I guess you do."

It takes all of his fucking strength but he manages to pull away from Jeonghan. "I'll be right back, okay? Sleep."

"Mm. Have fun."

It takes maybe a couple minutes in the shower, a few perfectly angled strokes (and maybe he pretends his own hand is Jeonghan's), and he comes, Jeonghan's name on his lips. He tries not to focus on that and how utterly fucking whipped he is as he dries off, and then forgoes clothes as he returns to the room. Judging by the slow rhythm of his breathing Jeonghan is close to sleep if not already there yet, and Cheol takes a moment to just look at him. A single moment, because anything more could be considered creepy. But in the few minutes he'd been gone Jeonghan had tossed the pillow beneath his head to the floor, opting to sleep on his bicep instead, and it's so endearing Seungcheol's heart actually hurts.

With a light sigh he slowly slips beneath the covers, planning to spoon Jeonghan because when is he ever gonna get this chance again? But the moment his body touches the mattress Jeonghan shifts so they're facing each other. Eyes still closed he fumbles around for Cheol's arm, stretches it out so he can lay his head on Cheol's bicep instead of his own. This way he can curl up against Seungcheol's body, somehow making himself so small Cheol can't help but wonder how anyone could be afraid of him.

You used to be.

Hmm. Used to.

He wraps his free arm around Jeonghan's lithe figure, stroking along the soft bumps of his spine with his thumb. Jeonghan shivers beneath his touch and with his head on Cheol's bicep they're so close they could kiss. So Seungcheol leans in, brushes feather-light kisses on his face.

"You're gonna snore, aren't you?" Jeonghan mumbles after their lips meet for the briefest of moments.

"Well good thing you don't sleep with me then."

Seungcheol grins even though Han can't see it. "Probably, yeah. But it won't be as bad since it's morning. My rhinitis tends to only be shitty at night."

Jeonghan grumbles. "That's good, I guess."

“Mm. Go to sleep, Hannie. I’m right here, okay?”

One of Jeonghan’s arms comes up to wrap around his middle and he breathes a soft “thank you” against his lips.

Seungcheol could ask why. At least right now there’s a few things he has to be thankful for: two orgasms in less than forty-five minutes, a bed partner. There’s also several things he should be mad with Seungcheol for. But he’s not. For once he’s not trying to rip his throat out or get him into bed with little games. No, for once he’s… he’s *real*. Sincere. A Yoon Jeonghan without walls, without fears or worries or thoughts in his heads. It’s something Seungcheol never thought he’d see so after another gentle kiss he settles in for more sleep, even though his arm is already starting to burn beneath Jeonghan’s head.

He hasn’t been this content in a long time.

To say Jeonghan is dazed and confused when he wakes up is an understatement. A very warm, very unfamiliar body is curled against his, his ears filled with a vaguely recognizable snore. Hmm. He opens his eyes and finds himself face to face with a sleeping - naked? - Seungcheol. Suddenly everything comes screaming back to him. Waking up earlier to Joshua’s soft voice because he knows how much alarms stress Jeonghan out. Stumbling around the hotel room on five hours of sleep, trying to make himself look as presentable as possible because he’s already stressing out as it is and Seungcheol wasn’t up and…

He’d looked so… so kind standing there in his boxers and nothing else, face and eyes puffy with sleep it’d tugged right at Jeonghan’s heartstrings. Handsome and genuine, freeing his finger from its stringy prison, touching him so gently Jeonghan felt he might break. The kiss, the dirty words he’d whispered that left a searing heat in Jeonghan’s gut. The orgasms, plural.

The call with Daewon.

Jeonghan groans and sits up, untangling himself from Seungcheol's warmth so abruptly it awakens him as well but Jeonghan doesn't really give a shit because why the *fuck* did he allow this to happen? Shit, it's probably nearing noon and he'd left Daewon hanging with no real plans for a meeting because he was getting his dick sucked. *Fuck* and then he'd allowed himself to fall asleep, butt-ass naked in Seungcheol's arms who also happened to be butt-ass naked. After not letting Jeonghan touch him because he - he'd wanted to worship him? Jesus, what kind of chivalrous bullshit…

"Hannie?"

Seungcheol's morning voice is simultaneously the sweetest and scariest sound Jeonghan's ever heard and paired with that fucking nickname? He scrambles off the bed on wavering legs, searching for his clothes as best he can with his sleep-muddled brain.

And then he's grabbed by gentle hands, hands that stroke at his wrists. Hands that, a few hours ago, were touching his skin, wrapped around his cock, making him feel so hot and desperate. *Shit.* Now they stop him in his tracks and Jeonghan looks anywhere but at Seungcheol's eyes. He knows he won't be able to resist what he sees there because a part of him already is screaming to get back in that bed with Seungcheol. To forget all his responsibilities, all his walls, and just *give in.* But he can't. Not this easily.

"Jeonghan, hey," Seungcheol murmurs, somewhere near his ear. "What's wrong?"

"Let me go," he snaps and, good for him, Seungcheol does as he's told. He doesn't move though so Jeonghan shoulders past him, spotting his clothes dumped in one spot beside the bed. His victory is short-lived however because this time when Seungcheol grabs him he *doesn't* let go and all but forces Jeonghan to look at him.

No, that's mean. Really, there's no forcing about it, nothing rough about his touch. He grasps Jeonghan's shoulders weakly - it's a grasp he could easily move away from - and his voice is soft, beseeching when he murmurs, "look at me, please."

It's just that Jeonghan isn't strong enough to resist. Even though almost every part of him is clamming up in self-defense, trying to make up for the intimacy they shared with distance and harsh tones, he's so tired of fighting. So he looks up and meets Seungcheol's eyes. There he finds nothing but worry and affection. The last two things he wanted to see, really, and the battle they wage against Jeonghan's defenses is already a lost one. Seungcheol's just stubborn. "Let me go," he says again, this time softer.

"Not until you tell me what's wrong." One of his hands comes up to stroke his cheek and Jeonghan vaguely remembers leaning into his same caress a while ago, the warmth that had fluttered through his body at such a gentle touch. Now it leaves him feeling empty and bitter.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Don't do this, Jeonghan," he whispers, moving in closer and Jeonghan should push him away. But it's so hard to do that when he's touching him in all the right ways. Tilting his chin up to meet his eyes, thumb stroking across his bottom lip. The touch-starved parts of Jeonghan are crying out for more. He wants this, needs this, *craves* this because he's never let anyone put their hands on him like this before. Not even Mingyu. But it's so much, it's *too* much, and he's so fucking disappointed in himself for allowing them to get this close. For letting his guard down for even a few moments because now Cheol's in there whether Jeonghan likes it or not.

(He *doesn't.)*

He's worked so hard to build his defenses up, keep everyone out who he knows would hurt him, whether they meant to or not, yet… here's Seungcheol. Holding him like there's something sweet and profound between them. Holding him like he has a *chance.*

"Don't shut me out," he murmurs, both hands coming up to hold his face now, and he's trying so goddamn hard. But Jeonghan can't let him in. He *can't.*

"I'm not doing this now, Seungcheol," he says, keeping his voice cold and flat. "Let me go. I have work to do."

His gaze is warm, *too* warm, too familiar, too intense and it sparks fear in Jeonghan's body. Seungcheol is dangerous, even if he doesn't try to be. And that's what scares Jeonghan the most. Seungcheol's just being himself. He's so fucking kind and caring, even when Jeonghan treats him like this, trying his best to get to a person he'll never see, never know. He's so kind and caring when there's no reason for him to be.

He's so kind and caring when I don't deserve it.

The thought chokes him up and he swallows against the lump forming in his throat. "I said let me *go."*

"You always fucking do this," he whispers, sounding so defeated and it'd break Jeonghan's heart if he let it. "You always shut down and - "

"'Always'? Fuck, you don't even know me, Seungcheol. You think you do but you *don't*. You've been in my life for, what, three weeks?" Looking him straight in the eyes, willing these next words to find their mark, he bites out, "That's nothing. You're not important to me and you don't fucking know me. So stop pretending like you do."

With an anguished groan he finally pulls away from Jeonghan but this victory feels cold, empty, when he sees the pain in Seungcheol's eyes, his slumped shoulders.

Do I really mean so much to him?

"I know you, Jeonghan," he says quietly, and those words shouldn't sting like they do. "I know you hate your father, even though you respect him and what he did. I know you would do anything for Channie. Even when you've had a bad day you always sit and listen to him and engage with him because you love him. I know you love your men, too. I see it in the way you tease them, the way you check in on them. You're their leader and you wouldn't hesitate to hurt anyone who hurt them."

With each word Seungcheol's desperation calms into something softer.

With each word Jeonghan closes up even more because he can't *believe* he didn't notice. Can't believe he allowed this to go on for so long.

"That's why I know it's killing you to go after Yooseok," Seungcheol continues. "He wronged you and the gang and he needs to suffer for it… but I also know you're scared."

"You don't like it, do you? Fighting, killing, torturing."

Fuck. *Fuck.*

"That's why Joshua's over almost every night, because you're not sure you can do this." By now he's taken Jeonghan's silence for something that it's not and he's moving closer again. Itching to comfort, the way he thinks Jeonghan needs. But Jeonghan doesn't need it; Seungcheol has no idea what he's talking about.

Doesn't he?

He reaches out and Jeonghan can't fight it. He allows this one touch, allows this one crack in his defenses because Cheol's breaking in, hitting all the right spots. His touch is gentle as it always is, even when they fuck hard and punishing, thumb stroking across his cheek. "I know you love strawberries and-and doing your makeup. I know you love reading and that you've played Animal Crossing."

That's it, that's the one that brings a brief smile to Jeonghan's lips, but it's enough for Seungcheol. He pushes through, breath warming his face, but Jeonghan can't meet his gaze. "Seungcheol…"

"I know whatever you went through in prison fucked you up," he murmurs, and the mere mention of it sends shivers of unease through Jeonghan's body. But Seungcheol's there, whispering sweet nothings that do more damage than comfort. "I know you have nightmares. And I… I know that you ended things with Mingyu after I said something about it."

He did, didn't he? Called him right up because Seungcheol was right and he'd been leading Mingyu on by accident. And Mingyu deserves better,

Seungcheol deserves better.

With a shaky breath he finally looks up and meets Seungcheol's gaze. He forces himself to be unresponsive to the warmth there, the affection, the pain and hurt he's caused because he's not strong enough to let Seungcheol in. He's not strong enough to let someone like Seungcheol love him.

Love. Is that what this is? What it could be?

"I don't know what you want from me," he whispers.

"You, Hannie," he says like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Like it would just be easy for him to do that. "I want you. I don't - fuck, I don't know why the hell I feel so strongly. You're just - I don't know. But after this morning, I'm - "

"Don't kid yourself, Seungcheol." It was supposed to come out cold and hard but instead his voice is weak. He *feels* weak. "This morning wasn't anything special. I used you, okay? I was stressed and I just - needed an orgasm."

"Is that what you're telling yourself?"

It's not *fair.* He's been in Jeonghan's life for such a short amount of time, he shouldn't be able to read him so well, to take aim at the walls he's built and actually make a dent. It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not *fucking* fair.

Yes, he'd been stressed. But he'd also been wanting Seungcheol. Like he has every single goddamn day for the last two weeks. At first his want had been mixed with anger, anger at how quickly and easily Seungcheol had shut him down and rejected him that night in the kitchen. He'd been hurt, and when Jeonghan's hurt he doesn't play nice. It had come out in cruel words and hard tones meant to wound, to punish. But who exactly, Jeonghan wasn't sure. *Isn't* sure. And then he'd learned they were going to Daegu.

That news had come with joy at first, joy because his two close friends that he hadn't seen in years were getting married. Shortly after the realization set in, however, sometime after Daewon's call actually. He'd have to meet with

him, discuss Song Yooseok-related plans, gather arms from Amber. Things would be going more in motion than they already were and he wasn't certain if he was ready. Still isn't certain, to be honest. And the moment he'd gotten off the phone with Daewon, who had his first thought been about? Seungcheol. Seungcheol and his stupid big eyes. Seungcheol and his stupid laugh and his perfect kisses and his shitty, dead father, his shitty, living cousin. He knew a trip to Daegu would be so hard on him so yeah he floated the idea of a truce because the two of them at each other's throats down here would be good for nobody.

That was - that was probably the moment when he realized Seungcheol was in deeper than he'd ever wanted.

And right now, this moment only confirms that.

In Jeonghan's silence, his thumb has ceased its soft tracing of his cheekbone and his gaze has lost its ardor. He just looks sad now. And it's for the best, because there's no fucking way they would ever work out. Seungcheol's too good for this life and he'll realize it soon enough. He'll want out and Jeonghan will let him (he's not that much of a monster), but Jeonghan… Jeonghan will never be able to leave. He's in this shit for life, has been since he was born, no matter how much he hates it. No matter how much he wishes he could leave.

"I can't be what you want, Seungcheol. And the quicker you realize that, the easier everything will be for the both of us." With that he pulls away. And Seungcheol lets him.

In his defeat Seungcheol merely sits on the edge of the bed, the bed they shared not too long ago, and Jeonghan can't read his expression as he redresses. And when Jeonghan leaves, neither of them says a word.

It's only when he reaches his and Joshua's room that Jeonghan breaks down.

His best friend is there in seconds, phone discarded mid-call, catching Jeonghan in his arms as he slumps against the closed door. He lets Jeonghan sob into his shoulder, stroking his hair, his back, murmuring soft things that Jeonghan doesn't listen to. He just *aches*. And the fact that he doesn't know

why only makes him hurt worse. He should feel good, right? He - he told Seungcheol that nothing could ever happen between them. Which is for the best, ultimately. Right?

Eventually Jeonghan calms down enough that he allows Joshua to lead him to his bed. In a moment he's buried in Joshua's chest, trying to focus on his heartbeat to relax. Breathing alongside the gentle rhythm Shua's set with his own breaths. He's always known just how to comfort Jeonghan and soon he's merely sniffling, clinging to his friend with a desperation he didn't know he felt.

Like always, Joshua waits for him to talk - or not talk. Everything is up to him and it's soothing in its familiarity. *Joshua* is soothing in his familiarity, all soft t-shirts and the same cologne he's had for years. Jeonghan knows him, can anticipate his words and his habits. But Seungcheol -

No.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, lets it out against Joshua's chest. Tries to focus on the long fingers curling through his hair. "Who were you calling?" he asks in a thick voice.

"Seokmin," Shua murmurs. "He called to check up on me." At the noise of protest Jeonghan makes, Joshua shushes him. "I love him but you will always be my priority, Hannie. Always."

Jeonghan lets out a defeated sigh. "How - how are they? Everything going well?"

"Of course. Wonwoo's holding down the fort. I talked to him earlier and he said that Channie's well, that everything's going as normally as always. So don't fret so much, Hannie. It's not good for you."

"I know," he murmurs, warmth spreading through his body at his friend's gentle scolding. And he wants to talk about Seungcheol, he thinks. He just… doesn't know how to bring it up. Doesn't know if he wants to hear the advice Joshua would give him. So he sits up and wipes the stray tears from

his face. Meets Joshua's concerned gaze with a sigh. "I'm sorry about this morning, missing the meeting."

"Don't be. You needed rest." Joshua hesitates, like he wants to say something, and Jeonghan will let him. They've known each other for over fifteen years; there's no shutting Joshua up when he has something to say. "You and Seungcheol…"

There it is.

"What about us?"

"Well, first off I could hear you." There's a teasing smirk on his lips but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Nonetheless Jeonghan's face erupts in an embarrassing heat and he groans an *"oh my god"*. "Second off," Shua continues, "I… I know you, Hannie."

"I know you, Jeonghan."

"And I think you might be overthinking all of this. Would - would it really be so bad to let him in, hmm?"

That's the problem with being best friends with someone for so long: soon they start to know you better than you know yourself. Jeonghan sighs heavily and sits on the edge of the bed where he can look at the floor and not at Joshua. "Yes," he whispers. "It would."

"Okay. Why?"

Why indeed. "I… I don't deserve him."

"Okay. Why don't you deserve him?"

"He's so *good,* Joshua. I'll end up hurting him and I can't… I don't want to do that."

There's a moment of silence and then he feels Joshua's arms wrapping around him again, from behind. He always knows just what Jeonghan needs,

and Jeonghan leans back against him with his eyes closed. "That's not the only reason though. Right?"

Jeonghan takes another shaky breath, willing himself not to cry again, he's *not* crying over Choi Seungcheol twice in one fucking day. "I'm scared," and his voice sounds so pitiful and small it disgusts him. "I'm scared of getting hurt too."

"And why do you think you'd get hurt?"

"I just - I would."

"I see." Joshua sighs heavily and pokes his cheek the way he did when they were younger, to try and get him to smile. It doesn't work this time but that doesn't deter him. "I love you more than anything else in this world, Yoon Jeonghan, yet you are the most stubborn asshole I've ever met."

"Hey!" Jeonghan pulls away from his embrace, swiping angrily at a few stray tears. "Fuck. Some best friend you are."

The smile on Joshua's face is warm, so perfectly *Joshua* that it's almost endearing. "I'm your best friend, I'm allowed to say shit like that. It comes from a good place, okay?"

"Yeah sure it does," he mumbles, but he knows it's true. Knows everything Joshua's said is right, it's just… "I can't get hurt," he whispers. "Not from this. Not by Seungcheol."

Joshua merely nods. Jeonghan's made his choice and he knows his best friend knows that. Just how there's no stopping Shua when he has something to say, there's no arguing against any decision Jeonghan makes. They're both stubborn till the end and maybe that's why they work so well together. With a heavy sigh Jeonghan finally stands from the bed, even though his limbs try and weigh him down.

"I'm gonna take a long shower," he says to Shua. "Can you call Daewon and reschedule our meeting for whenever he wants? And let - let Seungcheol know?"

“You got it, Han.”

With that, Jeonghan heads into the bathroom, determined to turn the water as hot as he can get it and scrub away all the bad feelings. Like he always does.

Notes for the Chapter:

also if you guys haven't seen yet, the second part of this series is a supplementary story about wonwoo & chan and scenes between them that won't fit in this main story. feel free to check it out here!

thank you guys for reading! <3

Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

tw: panic attack at the end, and i think that's it?

twelve: before i fall

"So how's Daegu?"

How indeed. Seungcheol can't help the groan that leaves his lips as he combs through his hair with one hand, the other holding the phone to his ear. Jaesung's voice crackles over the line, asking him what's wrong, and Seungcheol knows he can't be honest with him, since Jaesung will probably give him some bullshit he already knows about not getting involved with - with certain people. But maybe he needs to hear it since apparently he was stupid enough to -

No.

"Nothing really," he sighs, setting the comb down on the bathroom counter. He looks at his own reflection as he talks, noting the dark circles beneath his eyes. He hadn't been able to sleep again after… "I just never sleep well in hotel beds. Besides, it's Daegu. I don't feel anything but anxiety here."

"Which is unfortunate," Jaesung comments. "It's a beautiful city."

"I'm sure it is." With another sigh Seungcheol gives up on the rest of his appearance and decides to just get dressed, especially since it's nearing six. He finds the clothes Jeonghan had picked out earlier, still discarded on the floor, and sets them on his bed. "How's everything back home?"

"The usual. Everyone's working hard. I'm talking with Byungchul and Song Yooseok almost daily - "

"So Kim's phone *is* working."

Jaesung sighs. “Seungcheol, we’ve been over this.”

They have, but Seungcheol still doesn’t quite get it. It feels… weird not hearing from his section chief on the regular, especially during a job that holds so much importance. Byungchul doesn’t even really respond when Cheol sends his reports at the end of the week. Not that there’s been much to report. So maybe that’s it. There’s just nothing he needs to comment on.

God it’s still *weird.*

“Fine,” he grumbles, sitting next to his clothes on the bed. He’ll get ready when Jaesung hangs up, he just… needs to focus on something else right now. “So…”

He doesn’t say the name out loud, *can’t* with only a thin hotel wall separating him and Jeonghan, but Jaesung gets what he means.

“Yooseok’s cooperating, which is great. He and his men are gearing up for war, same as Jeonghan. The only difference is they won’t be caught unawares like Jeonghan thinks they will. I figure we’re at least a month out, if not more, from the battle but already it’s going to be a bloodbath. On Jeonghan’s side.”

Seungcheol crosses his legs, pretending like that statement doesn’t make his stomach churn. *Why* it does is the real question. But he ignores it, nagging at the back of his mind like an annoying pest. “Ah. Well, is there anything you need me to do, samchon?”

“No. Just keep going the way you are.” And then, after a moment’s pause: “I’ve looked over the two reports you’ve sent to Byungchul recently. And you’re sure that’s all that’s been going on?”

After the initial meeting, post-Kyuwon torture, Jaesung hadn’t sat in another. Probably because he’s not Jeonghan’s right hand man, just another member. But that means he doesn’t know what goes on among the twelve of them behind closed doors. That means he relies on Seungcheol’s reports for his information. And yes they’ve been a bit… lacking in content as of late. That’s why Byungchul hasn’t been responding, right? But it’s nothing weird

on Seungcheol's end. There's just not much going on. "Yeah, it's just - we haven't been talking about much."

Jaesung says nothing for twenty seconds - Cheol counts them all silently - and with each passing moment his heart starts pounding a bit louder in his ears. Ever since Ttukseom almost two weeks ago, his relationship with Jaesung has been strained. As in, Cheol's been waiting (on the edge of his seat, really) to hear more condescending words from him, more thinly veiled insults at his mother and his intelligence. So far Jaesung hasn't given any but every time Cheol talks with him, over the phone or in person, he's afraid. It keeps him quiet. And he wonders if Jaesung will say something now. Maybe about how he's bad at his job (Seungcheol knows that, thanks), how if he wasn't so scared all the time he might be able to tell them more.

But he doesn't say any of that. Actually the words that leave his mouth incite a deeper, heavier anxiety in Seungcheol's body because of what they imply.

"You've been getting closer to the boys lately, Seungcheol."

He might not be as smart as Jaesung or Jeonghan or Wonwoo or even Shua, but he can read between the lines. He knows what Jaesung's getting at, in his cold, detached tone. With another sigh he heads back into the bathroom, locks the door, and turns on the shower. That way if Jeonghan happened to be listening -

Why would he? He trusts you.

Cheol clears his throat, hoping it erases some of the uneasiness in his voice. "I - well yeah, of course. That's my job, isn't it? Get close to them, gather information, and relay it."

"Yet your reports are shorter than they've ever been."

Seungcheol frowns even though Jaesung can't see it. "What exactly are you implying, Jaesung?"

"You know, I recommended you for this job."

God. "I do know that."

How could he not? He remembers that day very clearly, actually. Byungchul asking him to meet at his office afterhours, long after the rest of the building had been cleared of NIS personnel, because he'd had something special to ask him. Cheol had been riding the high of leading a successful raid against a mid-sized drug smuggling ring that week and waltzed into Byungchul's office fully expecting a raise or something. He *hadn't* been expecting to see his estranged uncle sitting in the chair opposite the section chief's, a smirk Cheol remembered clearly on his lips.

"Seungcheol," Byungchul had said, "I believe you know my informant."

Nor had Cheol been expecting to be offered an undercover role in the biggest gang in Korea. Jaesung, knowing who he was, had specifically come to Byungchul and asked to put Seungcheol in, not another more seasoned agent. For reasons still unclear to Seungcheol.

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asks now.

"I asked Byungchul to put you under because I thought you could handle it."

"Why? You hadn't spoken to me in twenty years when you saw me that night. How could you know I'd be able to handle it?"

"Because of your family, who you come from."

The thought that Seungcheol is anything like him or his father or Daewon sends a stab of anger straight to his heart. But before he can say anything, Jaesung interrupts.

"But maybe I was wrong. Maybe your little… thing with Jeonghan is making you forget where your loyalties truly lie."

He can't help the way his stomach knots, the way his whole entire body seems to freeze. Like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. It takes a moment for his brain to start working again, to figure out words, and when he speaks his voice is thick. "How - how did you know about that?" If

Jeonghan told anyone it was probably just Joshua and he wouldn't say anything. Seungcheol definitely didn't tell a soul and if the others have noticed anything they haven't said a word to him. So how…?

"The boys are talking, Seungcheol, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that you two have had sex."

Shit. "Samchon, I - "

"You're supposed to get close with him, yes, and you can do that however you want. But if it's interfering with your job - "

"It hasn't," he says quickly, wanting nothing more than to change the subject. "I'm sorry, samchon, I just… there honestly hasn't been much to report. I've been talking with him and the others and there's just nothing of importance."

"It isn't your place to decide that, Seungcheol. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir," he murmurs, once again feeling like a kid, scolded and grounded, and he *hates* it.

"Byungchul and I are expecting a full report then, when you return to Seoul. Will you be able to deliver it?"

"Yes, samchon."

"Good. I have to go. Give Daewon my regards, hmm?" And with that, he ends the call.

For a moment, Seungcheol just stands there phone in hand. His mind is simultaneously crawling with thoughts and completely empty, in a way that only gives him more anxiety. He doesn't know what to think, what to *do* anymore. About anything. And to top it off he's about to head to dinner at some fancy restaurant to meet with Daewon. He'll be seeing Jeonghan for the first time in several hours, after he left him - *"I can't be what you want, Seungcheol. And the quicker you realize that, the easier everything will be for the both of us."* - so he's not excited for that, either. Really, he's starting to wonder why he didn't just ask to stay home in Seoul. Insist Jeonghan take

Mingyu with him or something. That would've been so much better for everyone.

He runs his fingers through his hair and turns off the shower before leaving the bathroom. And standing in the main part of the room, by the door, is Joshua. Panic comes to Seungcheol in tremulous hands, quickening breaths, pounding heart because *how long has he been here?* How much did he hear, if anything?

If he knows something or heard something, Shua doesn't give it away; he just fixes Seungcheol with a soft smile, tugging his jacket in place. He's dressed well, hair smoothed back off his forehead, and if Cheol focuses he thinks he can make out the outline of a gun strapped to his ankle.

Great.

"Did you just get out of the shower?" Joshua asks.

Seungcheol nods. "Just a quick one. Didn't get my hair wet."

Joshua merely nods, eyes watching him curiously, and Cheol's all but certain he notices his panicky tells. Joshua is *smart,* smarter than he tends to get credit for, and it's honestly kind of scary. So Cheol takes a breath and gives him a smile back. "Everything okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Just wanted to double check that you're almost ready. We can't be late to a second meeting in one day."

Seungcheol sighs softly and looks at the clothes on the bed. "Yeah. Just gotta get dressed."

"Ready to see Daewon again?"

"God," he groans, sinking onto the bed besides his outfit. Everything in his body is screaming at him to stay here and curl up under the covers, for so many reasons. But he can't. He has to be professional, pretend like nothing's wrong. "Don't remind me."

The mattress shifts and he looks over to see Joshua laying down beside him. This is the second time in two days they've been this close, the second time in two days Shua has tried to offer him comfort, and Seungcheol is grateful for it. Grateful that Shua cares about him. Their eyes meet and Joshua sighs heavily.

"Listen," he murmurs, "Daewon is the definition of a crusty nutsack, okay?"

The insult is enough to drag a laugh from Seungcheol's lips and then soon he and Joshua are laughing together, the kind of laughter that comes out of nowhere but seems to take over his whole body until they're both wheezing breathlessly on the bed. And then their eyes meet again and the laughter starts back up. Cheol's not even sure why he's laughing so hard - maybe it's because he's exhausted, and scared, and a bit sad, and anxious. Maybe it's because Daewon is *indeed* a crusty nutsack and he never thought he'd hear something like that come out of Joshua's sophisticated mouth. But either way, they laugh until they can't breathe, until tears are coming from their eyes, and Seungcheol feels a lot better than he did a few minutes ago.

"So yeah," Shua continues after a few deep breaths, a giggly waver to his voice. It's really cute. "If I've learned anything in the last decade and a half, it's that Daewon is a massive asshole. My point is, don't listen to what he says. I know that's usually easier said than done but…"

"No, I get it." Seungcheol sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "He reminds me of my father. Which makes sense because he probably spent a lot of time with him after my eomma and I left."

Out of his peripheral, he can see Joshua nodding. "He did. Which, yeah, explains the shitty personality I guess." He reaches out and pats Seungcheol's knee. "I have a proposition for you, Cheol."

God. The warmth that spreads through Seungcheol's chest at the nickname is so comforting and he turns his head to look at Joshua. "What's up, Shua?"

He sighs once more and gives Cheol's knee a squeeze before he lets go. "We've established that we both hate Daewon, so will you work with me to keep him from fucking Jeonghan this week?"

The thought of Daewon spending any time in any capacity with Jeonghan is enough to piss Seungcheol off, and he wonders if Joshua *knows*. About him and Jeonghan. He probably does, since Jeonghan is his best friend. "Yeah," he says. "I will. Trust me, I don't want that either."

"I thought so." With a heavy, put upon sigh, Joshua gets up from the bed. "I'll leave you to get ready, then. We leave in fifteen."

Ugh. "Is the restaurant nearby?" He sits up and glances at the clothes next to him. Damn things.

"Yeah, just a few minutes' walk actually. And we're meeting Amber there too. You'll love her."

He gets off the bed and spreads the clothes out, reaching for the t-shirt first. "She's our arms contact, right?"

"Yeah." When Seungcheol looks up and meets his gaze, Joshua's smiling. "I've known her just about forever and she 'adopted' Jeonghan a few years ago, shortly after his mom died. So yeah, you'll like her."

"I'm sure I will." Without a care as to social decency he just strips off his old t-shirt and tugs the new one over his head. It's loose enough that he'll probably tuck it into the slacks, maybe try and look good tonight.

"Hey, Cheol?"

He glances over and then frowns at the serious look on Joshua's handsome face. "Yeah? Everything okay?"

There's a moment of silence and then Joshua bites his lip. "I don't know everything that's going on between you and - and Jeonghan, but I do know that he tends to be really stubborn, and he's scared of opening up. So please don't give up on him, okay? I've never seen anyone get to him like this which means you're doing something right. So just keep fighting for him. He'll come around sooner or later. And - and as his best friend… well, he needs someone like you, Seungcheol."

"You're a good man, Seungcheol. And he'll come around to you eventually. He just… needs to know that he can trust you."

He thinks about the way Jeonghan let him hold him this morning, how close he'd snuggled in sleep. Waking up to him frantically searching the room, like he couldn't be there anymore. The cold, desperate look in his eyes. His cruel words. "You really think he'll let me in?"

"Yeah," Joshua murmurs with a nod. "He likes you, he just… he's been through a lot and it's hard for him to trust people. And I think he's scared of what he feels for you, what you feel for him. You just can't give up on him. Okay?"

There's something in Joshua's voice and his deep gaze that brings a profound, aching sadness to Seungcheol's heart. How much must Joshua care about his best friend to say this? How scared and closed off has Jeonghan been all his life that he's pushing Cheol away so harshly? It only deepens his feelings more, makes him wish their circumstances were different because he's almost certain there's no way he'll be able to help the NIS kill him. Not after what he's seen, the things he and Jeonghan have shared. Which means he'll have to truly betray the life he's always wanted. And for what, a man he's known for three weeks? A man who threatened to kill him? A man who's just as young and frightened as he is, hanging onto his sanity because of the friends he keeps. A man who makes him feel *more* than he's felt in a long time - more sadness, more sympathy and anger and desire and just *everything*. No one has ever made him feel this way and he knows, in that moment, he's gone.

"Okay," he says softly. "I-I won't. Give up, I mean."

Joshua nods. "Thank you. I - God, even if you two don't end up together or something, he just needs to know that… that it's okay to be vulnerable. You know?"

That sadness tugs at Cheol's heart again and he nods too. "You really care about him, don't you?"

“He’s my best friend,” Joshua murmurs. “I’ve loved him since I was nine years old and I’ve seen him go through things he wasn’t strong enough to deal with. But that - those are his stories to tell. Not mine.” He gives Seungcheol a soft smile before reaching for the door. “Shit, now you’ve got like ten minutes to get ready.”

“It’s all right. At least I don’t do my makeup.”

Joshua smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I feel like that’s a personal attack.” And then with that, he’s gone.

Seungcheol resists the urge to climb under his covers and process the information he’s just been given; instead he changes as quickly as he can, gives his hair another comb-through, and slips into the dress shoes he’d brought. Then he turns to his suitcase, to the broken-down gun he knows is in there. Being Jeonghan’s bodyguard he knows he needs to be packing, especially since this is unknown territory for the three of them, even with Daewon there. And like Joshua he’s brought with him an ankle holster. So he grabs all that, puts the gun back together, checks that it’s loaded with the safety on, and then he straps it in. Now he’s officially ready to go, with a couple minutes to spare. So he unplugs his phone, checks his notifications.

The only ones that catch his eye are from his “roomies” group chat. Chan and Wonwoo are, apparently going out to dinner tonight and Jeonghan had responded with some *“I hope Wonwoo-yah’s being responsible or I’ll kill him when we get back”* messages and Chan replied with *“hyung you’re so embarrassing”.* It makes Cheol smile, seeing their interactions, and he texts *“have fun tonight, Channie!”*

And then there’s a familiar, pounding knock on the door.

Let’s do this.

Jeonghan doesn’t look at him during the seven-minute walk to the restaurant. He stays a few steps ahead with Joshua at his side, the two laughing softly at stories or jokes Seungcheol can’t hear. And Seungcheol tries to focus on the

way his own shoes *click-clack* on the sidewalk to keep his mind from going crazy. He doesn't wanna do this, doesn't wanna eat a fucking dinner with his asshole cousin. Doesn't wanna spend an entire night with Jeonghan ignoring him the way he does when they get too close for his liking. Doesn't wanna be down here in Daegu at *all* but he needs to just get over himself because he's twenty-six years old; he's an adult. He's capable of getting through this, right?"

Daewon kisses Jeonghan's hand when they meet outside the restaurant, like some kind of greasy prince, and decidedly ignores both Cheol and Joshua. Which is just fine with them. Because in the next moment, Cheol watches as Shua's attacked by a short-haired woman a few inches smaller than them. She throws her arms around him and says something Seungcheol is pretty certain is English. And Joshua hugs her back just as tight. There's joy on his face and a glance to Jeonghan, currently with one of Daewon's meaty arms snug around his waist, shows the same on his.

"How have you been, Joshua?" the woman, no doubt Amber, asks in Korean as she pulls away. She looks so out of place with her cropped hair, red striped shirt, and loose-fitting jeans, but Seungcheol likes it. And then she pinches one of Joshua's cheeks and he likes her even more.

He was right.

"I'm good, Amber. It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

"You didn't come to the last meet-up. I missed you."

Joshua smiles. "I missed you too."

And then she turns to Jeonghan with a bright "my son!", hugging him just as close as she'd hugged Joshua. It warms Seungcheol's heart, hearing his soft giggle as he holds Amber close, nothing but happiness in his eyes. It's a good look on him. Then after the two of them catch up it's Seungcheol's turn. He can't help the unease settling like a stone in his stomach as this person, who obviously means so much to both Jeonghan and Joshua, turns towards him. Her smile softens a bit but it's still friendly.

“You’re new,” she says. “But I’ve heard a lot about you. Seungcheol, right?”

“You two haven’t met?” Jeonghan asks, now back in Daewon’s grip and it feels like a challenge.

But Cheol doesn’t take it. “Nah,” he says, ignoring the way Daewon’s thumb strokes over Jeonghan’s hipbone. There’s a mark there, one that Seungcheol made. He fights back a smirk. “Sanghoon always brought Mingyu on his gun meets so no, I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting Amber.”

“Well now you do!” She sticks out her hand and Cheol shakes it. “Amber Liu, good to meet you.”

He gives her a grin. “Seungcheol. Er, Choi Seungcheol. And it’s good to meet you too.”

She squeezes his hand in a friendly way that makes him smile a bit wider.

Dinner goes better than Seungcheol thought, all things considered. He sits quietly while Jeonghan and Shua catch up with their old friend, trying to ignore the way Daewon clings to Jeonghan like he has some kind of claim to him. As if *anyone* could. Cheol engages in the conversation where he can, mostly when Amber asks him questions or stories come up about the Seoul gang, stories he knows. But for the most part he’s content to stay quiet. He likes watching Jeonghan interact with his friends. Likes the way Amber can make him giggle and blush, how *young* he looks like this. And then their food arrives and the atmosphere at the table changes: it’s business time.

Amber begins with a gentle clearing of her throat, face growing somber. “So, I have the shipment waiting for you to inspect at one of the warehouses, Han.”

He must be familiar with the change in her voice because he frowns. “But?”

“But,” she confirms with a sigh and if all eyes weren’t on her before, they are now, food momentarily forgotten about. “My girls and I were bringing things up from Busan like always, right? And then outside Miryang, we were stopped by some guys. I guess they’re a small organization down there - “

“I know of them, yeah,” Jeonghan says, eyebrows furrowed. “We used to do business with them sometimes, way back in Jaehwan’s day. They stopped you?”

“Yeah,” she says. “On behalf of - get this - Song Yooseok.”

Jeonghan sits back in his chair, eyes narrowed. Joshua looks the same, Daewon’s scowling, and Seungcheol can’t really process what her words mean. He’s also heard of these guys down in Miryang - they usually stick to small-time drugs and ops, so -

“What are they doing with him?” Jeonghan asks, mirroring Cheol’s thoughts. “They never used to be affiliated with him, or with anyone. They’d - they’d do business with everyone.”

Exactly.

Amber shrugs. “That’s what I thought, too. And as far as I can tell they had no idea my shipment was for you. It was just a routine stop, to monitor activity in the area or something.”

“Why didn’t I know about this?” Daewon asks.

“Because Miryang isn’t your jurisdiction? I don’t know, Choi. You’re also not the head of this gang and if I thought it was important for you to know before Jeonghan I would’ve said something.” She huffs. “I mean, they were really easy to deal with.”

Jeonghan sighs heavily and glances at Joshua. “This isn’t good. Yooseok doesn’t *expand.* He never has. That’s one reason why he’s never been able to beat out Sanghoon. Which means he’s preparing for something big.”

Like your destruction.

No doubt this is Jaesung's doing, spreading Yooseok's influence all over the country so that he can take over Jeonghan's gang - or what's left of it - later a lot easier. So that he can ensure Yooseok's triumph. But, as usual, Yooseok is getting confident. Brazen. And now Jeonghan knows what he plans to do. Which means Jaesung won't be happy and he'll take it out on Seungcheol, expect him to do some kind of damage control. He probably ought to do that right now actually, try and persuade Jeonghan into thinking that it's just a coincidence.

Ought being the operative word there.

"We should up surveillance around the area," he suggests instead. "Seoul, too. See if we can find any chatter about this. The fact that Daewon or even Wonwoo had no idea means Song's keeping it hush-hush."

"That's what I was thinking," Jeonghan agrees, but he sounds far away. Lost in thought. The tight rise of his shoulders, his pinched brows, white-knuckled hands around chopsticks show Cheol just how stressed he is and he offers him a look he hopes is comforting. But if Jeonghan sees it, he doesn't return it. Instead he sighs once more and looks at Amber. "You took care of them?"

She nods. "Like I said, as far as I can tell they had no idea I was running something for you. So you guys should still be okay in terms of keeping things low profile. And they won't be going back to tell the right of their friends, so."

"Speaking of keeping things low profile," Daewon says and his arm slips from its seemingly permanent rest on the back of Jeonghan's chair. He meets Jeonghan's gaze. "The other branches and I have been talking and… we're not thrilled that you haven't gone after Yooseok yet."

Jeonghan's face immediately hardens.

"There's no point in waiting," Daewon continues, unfazed by his dark expression, "especially if he's trying to consolidate his power. It'll only make it that much harder to take him down in the end."

Which is exactly what Jaesung and Byungchul have been wanting.

“You think we can’t do it?” Joshua asks in Jeonghan’s silence, sharp eyes challenging, loyal to the end.

Daewon looks at him head-on, even casually. “I think Sanghoon would’ve crushed him the moment they found out Song was working with someone on the inside and we wouldn’t have had to worry.”

“I’m doing things differently,” Jeonghan says, a harsh finality to his tone and he fixes Daewon with a similar look. “And if you have a problem with that, Daewon, I’m not interested. Got it?”

But the other man still doesn’t back down. He’s all reckless confidence, just like his uncle Jaehwan, and he scoffs. “Whose fucking idea was it anyway, to wait? Yours?”

“Seungcheol’s.”

Oh. Fucking great.

He sighs as all eyes land on him, Daewon’s the most accusatory even though Jeonghan’s tone wasn’t full of blame. But when something doesn’t go Daewon’s way he always looks for fault. Just like Jaehwan. “Yes, I - “

“Of course he did,” Daewon snaps. “You really think he’s loyal to you, Jeonghan? That he hasn’t been undercover this whole goddamn time?” The scoff that leaves his lips is punitive and it, along with his words, turns Seungcheol’s blood to ice. Suddenly he can’t breathe, can’t move and he thought they were *done* with this shit. No one, including Jeonghan, had brought it up in weeks and he just - he can’t do this. He needs to say something, needs to shut Daewon up before he ruins everything, but he can’t find words. Can’t open his mouth. “You don’t know him at all, do you? Shit, he’d never leave the NIS voluntarily. It’s all he’s wanted to do since he was a kid, are you fucking kidding? You’re so - “

“Daewon.”

Jeonghan's voice is harder than Cheol's ever heard it, even when *he* was on the receiving end of his cold anger, and it quickly shuts Daewon up. The look on Jeonghan's face is icy, his long fingers playing with a butter knife on the table in a way that's so familiar Seungcheol can't help but shiver. Daewon eyes said knife, like he really expects Jeonghan to do anything with it (if he does, he doesn't know Jeonghan at all), and sits in silence.

Jeonghan waits a few moments before he speaks again, no doubt letting Daewon sit in fear, and Seungcheol wishes he would just - just get it over with. Tell the whole table what he truly thinks; that he never trusted Seungcheol to begin with. That Daewon's right. Fuck, he knows it's the anxiety making him feel this way, making his stomach feel like it's trying to come up through his fucking trachea (what a feat), but he can't breathe and he needs to calm down because he's going to give himself away, needs to fucking *breathe* -

"Seungcheol was born into this," Jeonghan says a bit quieter than he was expecting and it catches his attention. "We never met as children but I remember abeoji talking about him, all those years ago. Jaehwan ranting and raving about Miseon leaving him, and my father said something about losing Seungcheol. How good he would've been for the gang because, even at such a young age, it was obvious how much he cared about the people around him. And that's what you need in a leader, right?"

There's a moment when their eyes meet and Seungcheol takes a slow, deep breath.

What the fuck?

"He found his way back to us, didn't he? Betrayed the entire fucking NIS because, like we're all very aware of, it's corrupt. Do you know how hard it would be to do that, Daewon? To give up everything you know, to betray one of the top law enforcement agencies in the country to come back to the family you swore you'd never have anything to do with, because it's all you have?" He leans toward Daewon, eyes hard like ice. "Seungcheol has done nothing to warrant suspicious thoughts in his time here. I've learned that myself, as have all my men up in Seoul, so I won't stand for any of this bullshit. Got it?"

Daewon nods, an almost imperceptible movement. His face is just as hard as Jeonghan's, hand balled into a fist on the tabletop, and it - it feels like a victory.

Unfazed, Jeonghan continues. "I know Jaehwan raised you to hate him and Miseon but I won't tolerate that. Seungcheol is one of us and we don't say that shit about our members, without reasonable doubt. Am I understood?"

He sounds like a parent, scolding his errant child, and Seungcheol can't meet his gaze. Can't fathom the look in his eyes, his firm tone, his words. This is a victory, yes, but it's a loss in the same way because Jeonghan trusts him. Finally fucking trusts him after threats and cruel smirks and *reasonable doubt*. Finally trusts him after three weeks of not knowing.

And Seungcheol's only going to hurt him. Him and Chan and Joshua and Mingyu and Seokmin and - and everyone else.

"I need - I can't - " He's not able to form a coherent sentence, not with how suddenly suffocating this restaurant seems, so he gets up. Takes quick, wavering steps to where he thinks the front of the restaurant is, ignoring Joshua's soft callings of his name, ignoring the looks he gets. Ignoring the pair of sad eyes he can feel on his back, burning through him into his soul. He can't be here right now, really wants to go home, he can't fucking breathe -

And then he's out in the chilly, early April night air. His blazer is too light for how cold it is but he doesn't care. Just stands on the sidewalk, ignoring the looks and jostles of passersby, and just breathes. In and out, slow and deep as he can. Keeping count in his head the way he did for Jeonghan. Soon he calms down. His heart quiets, his stomach stops trying to escape via his windpipe, his hands stop shaking. He doesn't feel the overwhelming need to cry anymore. Fuck. He has no idea how long he's been out here, just that he's in the middle of a decently crowded walkway. That he left in a panic after Jeonghan defended him.

What a fucking mess you are, Seungcheol.

"Cheol?"

He turns at the sound of Joshua's voice. He's standing awkwardly near the door, hands in his pockets like he doesn't know what to do with them, and Cheol sighs. "I think I'm gonna head back to the hotel. If that's okay."

"Ask Jeonghan," he says quietly. "You're not my bodyguard."

Cheol sighs once more and glances at the high rise maybe half a mile away, where a soft bed awaits him. "Does he really feel that way?"

"Yeah," Shua says in that same quiet tone. It's pensive. "He trusts you, Seungcheol. Is that a bad thing?"

"No, I just… I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

The restaurant door opens again and Jeonghan walks out this time, something undecipherable written on his handsome face as he and Seungcheol lock eyes. They're standing maybe a few feet apart but it feels like miles because Seungcheol wants to touch him. But he can't.

"Are you okay?" Jeonghan asks finally, a warmth to his voice Cheol isn't used to hearing.

"Yeah," he says, whether anyone believes it or not.

Going off the looks on both Jeonghan and Shua's faces, they don't. And then they share a glance, one that only makes Seungcheol wanna go home more. Home to Seoul. Or - or even L.A. Where his eomma is. He banishes the thought from his mind with a hand down his face.

"You can go back to the hotel," Jeonghan says quietly. "It's fine."

Cheol doesn't need to be told twice. And only in the comfort of this unfamiliar hotel bed, under the covers with his clothes and shoes on the floor, face buried in the pillow does he allow himself to cry. How did it come to this? How did he get here, lost and scared and feeling like he's losing his mind because he has no one to truly talk to? Besides two people, everyone else in his life believes some kind of lie about him. A lie that will wound when it gets out. A lie he never used to think so deeply about because he

didn't care. None of these people were his friends, they were just a job. A means to a raise or a medal or a cushy desk job. Jeonghan was a cruel, cold boss like his father, threatening and murderous and ruthless. They *all* were and Cheol was okay with that because he didn't want to get attached.

But then something changed. He realized how black and white, how naive of him it was to think that way. He bonded with the boys, with Chan. Saw sides of Jeonghan no one else had really seen before. And now look at him. Shedding actual tears over them, over Yoon Jeonghan of all goddamn people, because he let himself get in too deep. Because Jeonghan is nothing like he expected, with his sad, guarded eyes and precious smiles and soft, warm skin. Because Cheol's too unpolished, too untrained to separate his feelings from his job. Because he was never ready for this, not on any level. And the fact that Byungchul would've known this from working with him should be a red flag. But Cheol can't focus on that. All he can think about is the fact that somehow, someway he's falling in love with Yoon Jeonghan.

And that thought is more terrifying than anything else.

Notes for the Chapter:

guess who's catching feelings lmao

as always, thank you guys so much for your continued love and support, and feel free to leave a comment and some kudos! love you guys, and stay safe! <3

Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

oof this is a fun one.

tw: guns & gunshots, references to human trafficking, blood, major character injury, (very) minor character death. also some other idols are mentioned but they're uh highkey not living... so... i'm sorry about that in advance!

enjoy! <3

thirteen: not yours to lose

The next couple days go by without much problem, which Jeonghan's grateful for. He's not entirely sure why Sunday, their first day here, went as badly as it did (well actually he definitely knows why, at least part of it) but the next morning everything seemed to be fine with Seungcheol. He was quiet over breakfast, scrolling through his phone like a teenager (read: Chan), no matter how hard Joshua tried to pull him into the conversation. Actually that's… how he's been lately, if Jeonghan's thinking about it. Ever since dinner with Daewon Seungcheol has been reserved and closed off, more so than usual. Sticking to the back so much that honestly sometimes Jeonghan forgets he's there. Like a true bodyguard. He's not usually overly talkative or bright to begin with, especially during work, but something about him now seems weird.

And Jeonghan can't help but feel responsible.

He thought he'd done the right thing by defending him to Daewon, killing two birds with one stone since it was also sort of a roundabout apology, for the shit he put him through a few weeks ago. But maybe it'd only added insult to injury after that morning. Maybe it wasn't *enough* of an apology and Seungcheol's expecting him to break down and actually say the words "I'm sorry" (which won't be happening anytime soon). Or maybe it has nothing to

do with Jeonghan at all and Seungcheol's just stressed being down here in Daegu. Maybe Daewon's words got to him and -

Maybe you're overthinking this.

He sighs heavily to himself, shifting in the passenger seat. He, Seungcheol, and Joshua are in the car, heading down to Miryang, and Jeonghan's been in his thoughts since they left half an hour ago. It's all he can do, really; Seungcheol's driving with a seeming hyperfocus on the road and Joshua's in the backseat on his tablet, either absorbed with work or reading webtoons. So Jeonghan leans his forehead against the window, taking in Miryang's beautiful overcast weather, like some brooding protagonist in a drama, with less problems than he thinks he has.

Sounds about right.

But he can't help it. It's been kind of *going, going, going* this whole trip. They checked on the arms shipment Monday, which was great (as always), and Amber went ahead and sent it up to Seoul, for Jihoon and Vernon to grab it. They've had two lunches and one dinner with Kibum and Jinki so far, which have probably been the least stressful part about all of this. Then they went suit shopping yesterday even though Seungcheol kept insisting he didn't need one, that what he wore Sunday was fine. Shua insisted right back that Kibum wouldn't let him walk into his wedding with those clothes so Cheol had picked the first thing that fit him: a simple black suit that Jeonghan had to pretend he didn't want to take right off of him.

So that had been fun.

Then it'd been meetings with Daewon and the rest of the Daegu branch, in which they caught up on things, discussed security and personnel. Daewon's right hand, a cold-looking woman by the name of Iseul (Jeonghan thinks he remembers her from before his prison stint), suggested in yesterday's meeting that they should send a few people down to Miryang to check things out. And for some reason, Jeonghan had volunteered them. In retrospect, he's not really sure why; any criminal orgs in Miryang would recognize Daewon before him and the fact of the matter is Kibum and Jinki's wedding is in a

few days and Jeonghan really just doesn't want to do anything strenuous today.

Which includes maybe possibly getting shot at.

Not that that would happen. The boys down in Miryang have always been decently friendly, more of a… neighborly drug smuggling ring than anything else. And they dabble in arms too, from time to time. They try not to step on anyone's toes; a tactic started by their first leader almost fifteen years ago, one that the others have tried their best to follow in the years since he left. But now they're aligned with Yooseok and targeting shipments to steal for their own? It's completely not like them and Jeonghan isn't sure what awaits them down in Miryang today.

He definitely wishes he would've kept his mouth shut in that meeting though.

"Jeonghan?"

He lifts his head from the cold window and looks over at Seungcheol. They're only a few inches from each other in this small sedan Daewon lent them, and somehow it feels both so close and yet so far. Every so often Seungcheol's hand will twitch where it rests on the driver's seat armrest, like he wants to reach out and touch him. But then he'll switch hands, placing his right hand on the steering wheel, left one in his lap, and the moment's gone. That's what he's doing right now, and Jeonghan doesn't know why it makes him feel as weird as it does.

"What's up?" he asks.

Seungcheol hesitates, eyes going back to the road. At almost ten a.m., it's surprisingly not too traffic-y, but that's probably because they're on some barely paved street, heading towards the unpopulated outskirts of Miryang. "How are we gonna play this?"

It's a good question, one that Seungcheol should know the answer to because he's bodyguard, after all. But Jeonghan's not sure how he wants this meeting to go. He sighs. "Do you have any suggestions?"

“Yeah, actually. I um… I think we should try and go in with peace in mind,” he says quietly, not surprising Jeonghan in the slightest. But he decides to hear him out. “If they *are* working with Yooseok, maybe that means they’re willing to work with us as well. And we could get information.”

“True,” Shua says as casually as ever, and Jeonghan had no idea he was listening. But Shua’s *always* listening. Hell, Jeonghan knows him well enough - he probably isn’t even looking up from his tablet. “Or we could be walking into a trap. Maybe they’ve found out Amber’s shipment was for us and have relayed that info to Yooseok, who’s waiting to kill us there.”

Seungcheol sighs and he meets Jeonghan’s gaze for a moment before refocusing on driving. “Ultimately, it’s up to you. But I have a weird feeling about all this.”

“I’ll… take that into consideration,” Jeonghan says quietly.

After that the car descends into silence again. Jeonghan leans his head back against the window, watching as a few farmhouses go by. According to their intelligence these guys have grown a bit since Jeonghan remembers. Last time he heard about them it was just about eighteen of them down here, leader duties split by three of them. Now they’ve grown - apparently there are almost thirty of them now. Not as small-time as they used to be, but apparently all the old players are still there. Which is good. Jeonghan knows them, could reason with them and talk to them. Find out why, all of a sudden, they’re working with Yooseok.

Or Joshua’s right and there will be nothing to reason, nothing to talk out.

They come to a stop near a large warehouse, off of a loose gravelly road. A warehouse Jeonghan vaguely remembers from the one or two times he came here with his father, long before his prison sentence. There’s three SUVs out front, a few security cameras Jeonghan can see at first glance, but other than that this place looks dead. Seungcheol kills the car and they all sit for a moment in silence.

“So?” he asks quietly, big brown eyes entreating as they meet Jeonghan’s gaze. “We going in guns blazing or are we talking to them?”

Jeonghan glances back at Joshua, sees his slight shrug that says "up to you", and he sighs, hoping he's making the right decision. That's the thing, with these two - they're both so loyal they'll go along with whatever Jeonghan decide and defend his decisions to any naysayer. Even if they don't like it. "We'll talk to them," he says after a moment. "Let them explain why they went after Amber's shipment, why they're working with Yooseok, and then we'll go from there." He sighs softly. "Jun. K, JB, and Sungjin are all pretty reasonable."

At least, he hopes they still are. Since reasonable men don't tend to align themselves with Song Yooseok.

"You got it," Seungcheol says.

And with that, they all exit the car. They're close enough to the coast that the Busan breeze cools the morning even more and Jeonghan's glad a petty adherence to his own fashion code means he's always in this black coat. They make their way to the wide-open doors, where a figure emerges. Jeonghan's never seen him before, couldn't even tell anyone his name, and figures he's one of those new kids they added since Jeonghan's been in prison. He's short, probably around Chan's height, with a mop of messy blonde curls. Dressed in black clothes, his face is set grimly and he looks *young*. Younger than Jeonghan, it would seem. It puts stones in his stomach and he swallows as they approach.

The young, unfamiliar man suddenly stops. Looks at Jeonghan with his head tilted, eyes narrowing. He's not wearing sunglasses with the thick, gray clouds overhead, so Jeonghan can see his curious expression. They're a few feet apart and there's not a weapon on this kid that Jeonghan can see.

He doesn't like this.

"Yoon Jeonghan-ssi?" the kid asks, in slightly accented Korean. But an accent he doesn't know, hasn't heard before.

"Yes," Jeonghan responds and the boy's shoulders tighten. "Who am I speaking with?"

“Chr - uh, Bang Chan,” he says, and then he bows. “It’s an honor to meet you, Jeonghan-ssi. Um, I figured you would be coming.” Rising back to his full height, he scratches the back of his neck. “So we - well, we found out it was your shipment we went after and um…”

“Where’s JB?” he asks when the kid trails off, wondering why he’s being greeted by him. “Let me speak to him.”

The kid’s face considerably pales and he glances between the three of them. “You - you didn’t hear?”

On either side of him Joshua and Seungcheol both tense. This doesn’t bode well, but Jeonghan tries to keep his face passive. Whatever happened to JB, why hadn’t Wonwoo or Daewon’s men known? Why couldn’t they find it out?

“He’s not - he’s dead,” Bang Chan says quietly, and he’s far enough away that Jeonghan almost doesn’t hear him.

Almost.

“Dead?” Joshua demands before Jeonghan can. He’s still trying to process that information because *what?* Dead? Their intelligence *definitely* didn’t say anything about that. Which isn’t normal, by far. They should’ve known that. So why didn’t they? “What about Jun. K? Or Sungjin?”

“Dead too,” Bang Chan says, voice tight. “Taecyeon, Junho, Jinyoung, Jackson, Younghyun, Wonpil… they’re all - “ He sighs heavily, looking at the ground for a moment. He’s clenching his jaw so hard it trembles when he finally meets Jeonghan’s gaze again. “It’s just me now, okay? I’m - I run things.”

Because JB and the others are dead.

Jeonghan doesn’t know what to think.

“But you’re so young,” Seungcheol whispers, as if to himself.

“Han,” Joshua mutters under his breath, eyes never leaving Bang Chan’s small form, “I don’t like this. We know JB, we know Sungjin, even Jun. K. We don’t know this kid.”

“Are you here to hurt us?” Bang Chan asks.

And Seungcheol immediately looks at Jeonghan, big eyes soft and entreating. “You said we’d talk first, Jeonghan,” he murmurs, which is true. “See what happened. Obviously something went wrong here. My gut says it’s Yooseok. Come on, even I know JB and Jun. K and Sungjin. They never would’ve aligned themselves with a man like Yooseok, because Park made sure to drill that into them before he left, didn’t he?”

Jeonghan sighs heavily and looks back at Bang Chan, standing with his hands in his jeans pockets, face so young. Anxiety threatens at Jeonghan’s mind, filling his head with doubt, weighing down his limbs, but he won’t succumb to it. He’s been training to lead, to make hard decisions, to act on his gut feelings for years now. He can do this.

“No,” he says to the kid. “We’re not here to hurt you. We’ll talk.”

Bang Chan nods, and Seungcheol steps forward, reaching behind him. He tugs his handgun out and produces it with spread fingers, hands up. The kid watches carefully, eyes narrowed as Cheol sets it on the ground. And then he lifts his pants leg up, removing the gun from there as well. Really, he shouldn’t be doing this without Jeonghan’s explicit permission - if there’s one of them who should remain armed as long as possible it should be the fucking bodyguard - but he does it anyway.

With a sigh Joshua follows suit. He doesn’t like going anywhere without his pistols, especially not into unfamiliar territory, but Seungcheol has a point, silent as it is. They’re here to talk, not fight. So Jeonghan produces his guns as well and then there’s a moment where the four of them just stand there, in silence. Bang Chan eyes the guns still, young face unreadable, and then he sighs as he turns towards the open doors of the warehouse. He calls two names - Changbin and Han - and a few seconds later two kids come out. They look younger than their leader, maybe even younger than Channie, and

Jeonghan doesn't like this. Doesn't like how scared and anxious Bang Chan seems. Nothing about this feels right.

The two newcomers collect their guns without a word, eying Jeonghan curiously, and then they disappear into the warehouse again.

"Come on," Bang Chan says with a ghost of a smile. "Meet my kids."

The warehouse is big, big enough that it could house the shipment Amber secured and then some, but there's not much in it. Some desks are tucked into the corner with computers on top. The screens show a variety of security camera angles and in one Jeonghan can see the car they came in. More towards the center sit a bunch of couches upon which are a bunch of kids. Literal, actual kids. Okay well maybe young adults. But they don't look old enough to drink, let alone handle guns and kill people. Actually they look a lot like Hongjoong and his boys, when Jeonghan had found them in Anyang a few years ago. Scared and lost and ragged. Way too young to have been through the things they went through. It hurts his heart, and he watches as Bang Chan approaches the couches.

The moment the boys catch sight of Jeonghan, Shua, and Seungcheol they *all* tense. Eyes downcast, fingers and feet tapping on whatever surfaces they can find.

Bang Chan starts with introductions. "Guys, this is Yoon Jeonghan."

"Like, *the* Yoon Jeonghan?" one of the smaller kids asks, looking like he should be in a classroom right now.

"Yeah, *the* Yoon Jeonghan."

None of the kids bow and if Jeonghan were anything like his father he would make a big deal out of it, teach them some respect or whatever. But he gets it; they're scared. And he's not exactly known for his… friendly reputation.

“This is my second, Joshua,” he says motioning to him, “and my bodyguard, Seungcheol. We’re not here to hurt you. I promise. We’re just here to talk.”

It doesn’t do much, if anything, to quell their anxiety but a couple of them glance up at him and maintain eye contact for half a second. So Jeonghan considers that a win.

“You’ll have to excuse them,” Bang Chan says quietly. “It’s been a rough couple weeks.” He motions for an empty couch and Cheol’s the first to sit, obviously trying to set a precedent. And once the three of them are sat down, Jeonghan between his companions, Bang Chan lets out a heavy sigh. He’s sitting amongst his men too and the nine of them seem to cling to him and each other. It takes a few moments for him to speak. “Two weeks ago, I was some nobody in this gang. JB plucked me and Felix off the streets a couple years, out of the kindness of his heart.”

One of the other boys, no doubt this Felix, looks down at the ground.

“I won’t go into details because that’s not the point,” Bang Chan continues, “but JB literally saved the two of us. And the rest followed. And I mean, they were our hyungs, no question about it. Watched out for us, trained us, helped us. We loved them, and - and they loved us. And then…” He takes a shaking breath and pushes through it. “About three weeks ago, this guy named Song Yooseok came to us.”

At his mention, Joshua and Seungcheol tense as much as Jeonghan does, Jeonghan gripping his own knee with white knuckles. Three weeks ago. Right around Sanghoon’s death. That *can’t* be a coincidence.

“I take it you know him?” Bang Chan asks around a wry smile.

“To say the least,” Jeonghan responds, voice taut.

He nods at this. “Well, we didn’t really. I mean JB, Sungjin, and Jun. K had all heard of him but his influence was mostly relegated to Seoul, so we’d never had dealings with him. But he came to the three of them here and gave them an ultimatum: he was taking over and we’d either join him willingly or he’d force us.”

Fuck. Jeonghan doesn't like where this is going.

"Suffice it to say, the three of them didn't give a shit. JB-hyung even - even kinda laughed in his face."

"Not good," Seungcheol murmurs and he actually blushes a bit when Bang Chan's eyes meet his, a shy smile on his plush lips at being noticed.

Christ.

"Not good," the kid parrots with a heavy sigh. "They told Song that we don't pledge allegiance to anyone; we'd work with him but he couldn't take over. So Song said 'watch me' and left with his men. Within the week…"

The boys all tense again. Some of them look at the ground, anywhere except each other, but they cling to hands and arms and knees and waists and shoulders. It's obvious how close they are, how *scared* they are and Jeonghan manages to share glances with both Shua and Seungcheol before Bang Chan continues.

"Within the week," he tries again, sounding stronger, "all of them were either dead or-or left. Nineteen of them just… gone. In a week. I-I guess Song and his thugs didn't come after the rest of us because he figured he could use us? I-I don't even know why he's down here in Miryang to begin with, why *us…"*

The boy next to him squeezes his hand and murmurs something soft near his ear, thumb stroking his skin the way - the way Seungcheol does with *him.*

"But he did spare you?" Joshua asks.

"Yeah. Said something about needing us, I don't really know. But I stepped up because - well, I had to. I couldn't let anyone else die either and-and - "

"It's okay," Jeonghan says quietly, stopping the kid before his rambles turn frantic. Bang Chan's eyes are wide, hands trembling where they're held, and with that mop of blonde hair he looks like a stressed-out college student. Not a gang leader. He shouldn't be here, none of them should, and Jeonghan

sighs. “I’m not upset. I’m assuming Yooseok told you to attack our shipment?”

He nods. “I heard him say something to one of his men about a Yoon but I-I haven’t been in this shit long enough to know you by family name, sorry. I-I honestly just took an educated guess when you showed up today.”

Seungcheol grins, despite everything going on. It’s that gummy smile of his, the one that makes Jeonghan stomach flip. Even now.

“Is that amusing, Seungcheol?” he asks.

“Damn right it is.” The joy on his face actually seems to lift some of the boys’ spirits; they titter amongst themselves and even Bang Chan bites his lip, like he’d holding a grin of his own back.

And then the moment’s gone as quickly as it came, replaced by tense, somber air again.

“You lost men when you attacked our shipment, right?” Joshua asks.

“Not any of mine,” he says. “They were Song’s men that he left here to make sure we did what he wanted, I guess. But now they’re dead and when he finds out…” He sighs. “We haven’t sent him any updates so I imagine he’ll be sending some men soon to check on us and - “

“We’ll protect you,” Jeonghan says and he’s a little surprised at himself for the conviction in his voice. But he’s not letting anything happen to these kids. Just like he didn’t let anything happen to Hongjoong and his boys. Like he doesn’t let anything happen to Channie or his own men. He ignores Joshua’s curious gaze and Seungcheol’s breath of relief. Just focuses on Bang Chan and his kids and the way they seem to deflate, but in a good way. Like Jeonghan’s doing the right thing. “We’ll get you set up either up in Daegu with Choi Daewon or up in Seoul with me.”

“Thank you, hyung,” Bang Chan says quietly, relief thick and straining his voice. “God, just - *thank you.”*

His intelligence man, a thin kid by the name of Minho, wipes everything from his computers while the others clean out the warehouse. They load up their SUVs with Seungcheol's help and Joshua sticks by Minho's side, making sure he's cleaning *everything*. Wonwoo's taught him some stuff over the years, mostly at Shua's own insistence, so he should be able to figure things out if Minho needs it. And Jeonghan just watches. Watches these boys and their jittery gaits and soft voices and wide eyes. A part of him can't believe he's doing this, letting them join up with their ties to Yooseok. But that's why security camera feeds and computer servers are being wiped; if they can get these boys out of here without leaving a trace they'll be safe. And Jeonghan will still have time to prepare for a confrontation with Yooseok.

The other part of him is not at all surprised this happened, because of course it did. Jeonghan's always been especially sensitive to those younger than him, no matter how capable they are. He knows it's because he definitely would not have chosen this life for himself; it's a cruel, unforgiving way of existence and he wants to protect his dongsaengs for as long as he can. It's probably one of his greatest weaknesses, one he knows will get the better of him someday, like it has in the past. But hopefully today is not that day.

They're gingerly loading the computers into the back of one of the SUVS, Minho watching like a hawk, when Bang Chan gets a call. A call that drains all the color from his face and when he hangs up he turns wide eyes to Jeonghan.

"He - they're - they're - "

He's all stutters and clipped breath and Jeonghan immediately walks over to him, letting Seungcheol handle the computers on his own. But he doesn't seem to mind - Jeonghan can feel his eyes burning through his coat as he no doubt watches him - and then he's telling Bang Chan to take some breaths, to tell him when he's ready.

"They're sending men out here," he hisses, quiet enough that only Jeonghan can hear him. "Yooseok's men, up from Busan. They're pissed that I haven't reached out and - "

"Okay," Jeonghan says. "We're just about done loading up the cars and you nine are gonna head down the highway towards Naeseo, okay? It's the opposite direction Yooseok's men are coming from and Joshua, Seungcheol and I will deal with them. And once the coast is clear we'll call and give you directions to my place in Daegu. All right?"

Bang Chan nods, fear in his eyes. But he addresses his men calmly, the way a good leader does, and after exchanging phone numbers, the nine of them leave. For a few moments Jeonghan, Shua, and Seungcheol stand in silence, watching the SUVs depart. He can feel their eyes on him but he doesn't want to speak. Doesn't want to answer the questions he knows they have, doesn't want to explain himself.

"We should head inside," he says finally. "See if we can find some cover."

Bang Chan's men, Changbin and Han, had left their guns for them on the desks that used to house the computers and they take a few minutes to make sure they're loaded, safeties off. Jeonghan tries not to fidget with his, tries not to think about the impending fight. Who knows how many men Yooseok's sending? Could be one, could be fifteen. Joshua's a good shot and Seungcheol has to be, with his police training, and it's only then that Jeonghan realizes he's never been in a situation like this with Seungcheol before. He remembers the words he spoke to him a few weeks ago, borne more out of fear and anxiety than pure hate, *"What better way to show allegiance than to take a bullet for the gang's leader?",* and sighs. Would Seungcheol actually take a bullet for him?

Would Jeonghan *want* him to?

He glances over at him now, crouched behind the desk next to Jeonghan's, a grim look on his handsome face. Something heavy sits in Jeonghan's gut, rooting him to the spot as it churns in his stomach, and he realizes that he's… he's *worried* about Seungcheol. Wants him to make it out alive. For *some* reason. Jeonghan knows he's in denial, that much is obvious to him, but it's incredibly easier shutting down, closing off than accepting his feelings. Especially when Seungcheol catches his gaze with those big stupid eyes that look black in the overcast light spilling in from outside. Jeonghan doesn't need to be able to read minds to know what he's thinking; he feels like he

knows Seungcheol well enough by now. No doubt Seungcheol's worried about him, too. Worried about him being able to fight the men that will walk in. And Jeonghan can. He just might not want to but he can.

He *has* to.

Joshua's taking cover behind one of the couches near the center and none of them speaks. The silence is too heavy, too oppressive, and Jeonghan needs to focus. If they can manage to take out all of Yooseok's men before they get word back to their base, that would be the best-case scenario. Well, best case scenario would be getting at least one of them back to Daegu for torture. But they could leave the other two here, and that way Yooseok finds their bodies a few days later and Jeonghan, Shua, and Seungcheol are back in Seoul, with Bang Chan and his boys safe and sound in Daegu.

"Don't let them make any calls or anything," Jeonghan says to his companions, sounding like he's yelling in the quiet. "We need to take them all out ASAP. So as soon as you can get a clear shot, take it. But shoot to wound, not kill. I'd like to get at least one of them back for interrogation, see what they know, if anything."

Joshua and Seungcheol both nod, and then the silence is broken by the thundering roar of a car engine. Everything in Jeonghan's body tenses and he crouches behind the desk, finger hovering over the trigger. The car engine cuts out and then two doors slam. Which could mean no more than four men will be approaching. But there might be more out there and Jeonghan tries not to dwell on that, on the fact that they're in this blind. Even with the element of surprise, it might not be enough.

There's a small hole in the back of this wooden desk, near his current eye-level, and Jeonghan peeks through that to watch. He sees three men dressed head to toe in black, each of them as big and intimidating as the last, taller and broader than Mingyu by a *lot*. Yooseok likes his enforcers like that, likes them to put the fear of God in everyone they come into contact with, but Jeonghan isn't scared. They can take these fuckers.

Probably.

The men survey the almost empty warehouse, hands going to the holsters on their hips.

"They're supposed to be here," one of them says. He's the bigger of the three and in Yooseok's hierarchy that would probably make him the de facto leader. "Which means they probably took the shipment for themselves."

"You think those squirrelly brats would go against Yooseok like that?" one of the others says. He's got a big ugly scar on his face. It makes him look like a sixty-year-old man. "No, I'm sure something happened with the shipment. Ryu probably overestimated Liu, like he fucking does with everyone, didn't get it, got killed, and so the kids ran when you called."

"That's why you don't call, hyung," the third one says.

The first man scowls at him and then starts taking slow steps around the warehouse. His heavy footsteps echo in the silence and Jeonghan tenses even more as he begins to approach the desk. *Shit.* The hole is big enough to stick the muzzle of his gun through, maybe he can get the guy's kneecap or something. Beside him he sees Seungcheol shift to peek around the side of his own desk.

Biggest guy is currently ranting as he walks, voice quiet. "I told Yooseok not to fuck with Jun. K, JB, and Sungjin but did he fucking listen to me? No. Now we gotta deal with these fucking kids - "

"Who gives a shit?" the second says, eyes glancing off every surface he can find. Looking for something. He's close to the couches, shit so is biggest guy - if they move any closer they'll see Joshua. "When we find 'em, we'll get 'em set up in Busan with Dongsoo. I'm sure he could get a lot of won for 'em; they're young enough."

The thought makes Jeonghan's blood run cold and he tightens his grip on his gun. As shitty as Sanghoon was he never dabbled in human trafficking because that's reserved for scum of the earth, like Yooseok.

"We can't," the first says with a sigh. He's close enough that Jeonghan could take out both his kneecaps in half a second but he doesn't. He'd rather listen

to this guy talk. And then he'll wound him. "We need these kids, apparently, if we have any chance of taking Yoon down."

Fuck. His heart starts pounding in his ears, blood thrumming with anxiety, and he readjusts his grip on his gun.

"I don't get it either," the biggest guy continues, eyes scanning the warehouse, "but that's what Yooseok's buddy said, I guess." His hand is still on his holster but he has yet to take out his gun. *Big mistake.* "That we need to be pulling from all sides of the country, since we're not strong enough yet. I think that's some bullshit; if we just struck now Yoon wouldn't see it coming and we'd kill him. And Yooseok's buddy could take over the way he's been wanting, I guess."

What? Who's this 'buddy'? Is he in the gang? A *rat,* who apparently thinks he could just off Jeonghan, get away with it, and take over?

He feels Seungcheol glance at him, sees him tense.

Apparently this is the guy to take alive. Get him set up in Daewon's torture rooms, bleed some answers out of him. The thought makes Jeonghan's stomach churn and he aims his muzzle at the guy's kneecaps.

"Has Yooseok's friend heard from his contact at all?" the third guy asks, getting ever closer to the couches.

"You think I have direct contact with him?" first guy snorts, turning around to face his companion. His back is to Jeonghan now. "All I know is that I heard Yooseok say something about his friend not being thrilled with the info he's been given. That the whole reason they're keeping that contact alive is for the shit he can give them on Yoon." He sighs and out of his peripheral, Jeonghan sees Seungcheol tense. Like he's getting ready to take his shot. *Shoot to wound,* Jeonghan begs silently. *We need him.* "I dunno, man. It all seems like some bullshit, especially since I heard Yooseok's man's man works for the - "

A gun shot rings out, from a few feet to his left, and Jeonghan jumps as the sharp *crack* of it echoes through the warehouse. It's loud as thunder,

reverberating throughout his whole body, and he springs into action. Ears ringing, heart pounding, he jumps up from cover and aims at second guy without a thought. He's down before he can even grip his own revolver, two bullets embedded in his back. One from Jeonghan, one from Seungcheol. Next it's third guy's turn, taken out by a quick shot to the gut, thanks to Joshua.

And then all three of them turn their guns onto the apparent leader.

He raises his hands above his head, one slick and crimson from the wound in his shoulder, the other holding to his gun. He's saying something Jeonghan can't quite make out over the ringing in his ears, lips moving too quick to catch. Maybe he's trying to reason with them. Surrender. But the hole in his shoulder is leaking blood faster than he's got time and Jeonghan needs him to let go of the goddamn gun so they can get him restrained, try and stop the bleeding. Until they get back to Daegu.

"Drop it!" he hears Seungcheol bark from a few feet away, aiming his own pistol with stone hands. His voice is muffled, like Jeonghan's underwater, but he sounds so assured, confident. Like he knows exactly what he's doing, and Jeonghan wonders how many times he stood like this as a cop or NIS agent. Trying to reason with dangerous gangsters, get them to do what he wanted. "Fucking drop it!"

Sounds are starting to come back into focus; Jeonghan can make out Seungcheol's heavy breathing, Yooseok's guy's quick, pained pants, Joshua's demands for him to drop the gun as well. But Jeonghan's eyes don't leave that man. His black sleeve is wet and shiny with blood, shimmering in the lowlight as he stares Jeonghan down with gritted teeth, muscles working beneath the skin of his jaw.

"Drop the gun," Jeonghan says, surprised at how even and calm his voice sounds, "and we'll let you live."

The man snorts a pained laugh. "Until you've gotten what you wanted from me. I'm not - *ah!* - I'm not fucking stupid, Yoon. Fuck."

There's no use arguing with a dead man, one resigned to his fate, Jeonghan *knows* this, but they need this guy alive. Need him to talk because Jeonghan has to know more about the fucking leaks in his midst. "Drop the gun," he repeats. "I won't ask again."

For a silent moment, the man glances between him and Seungcheol. Joshua, a few yards away, tightens his grip on his gun, eyes narrowing as he stares down the barrel, and Jeonghan takes a breath.

And then Yooseok's man aims his pistol, perfectly aligned between Jeonghan's eyes.

A shot this close would kill him instantly, he's sure of it.

So's Yooseok's man, by the dark, satisfied look in his eyes.

Fuck, would he even feel it? Would he even know when it hit? Would -

He squeezes his finger around the trigger. The bullet cracks through the air, as does a second. There's a shout Jeonghan recognizes as Seungcheol's but he can't make out his words. Can't move, can't breathe as he waits to feel that sharp, burning pain. Waits to feel nothing.

But it never comes.

He's on the cold ground the moment after Yooseok's man pulls his trigger, shoved there by a pair of strong, warm hands. Hands so familiar to him, always so comforting when they touch him, and he watches in slow-motion horror as Seungcheol collapses beside him, something crimson spilling from a hole just below his collarbones.

"Shit!"

That's from Joshua, Jeonghan thinks, but he can't really tell because Seungcheol's wheezing through gritted teeth, hands scrambling to stop the bleeding but every time he moves he groans, deep and full-bodied, and Jeonghan's *alive* because Seungcheol took a bullet for him.

He moves quickly, getting Seungcheol onto his back as Joshua drops to his knees beside them. Puts his hands on the wound, presses down to stem the flow of blood. Tries to ignore Seungcheol's moans of pain, the way he clings to Jeonghan with weakening hands; the warmth of the liquid beneath his hands, as it starts to seep between his fingers.

Fuck.

"Get back here *now,"* Joshua barks into his phone, covering Jeonghan's hands with one of his own, pressing down too. Seungcheol hisses in his breath and Jeonghan can't find the words to comfort him. "Seungcheol's been shot, I don't know if he'll make it to Daegu - "

"I'm fine," he grinds out in a hoarse voice and Jeonghan would laugh if anxiety didn't have his throat closed up because he's obviously *not* fine. God he's bleeding so goddamn much. What if the bullet nicked an artery? Or an organ? What's near the goddamn collarbones? Fuck, Jeonghan knows nothing about anatomy and can't *fucking* breathe with how hard his stomach's churning.

"Keep pressing, Hannie," Joshua says as he taps something on his phone. "Bang Chan and his kids are coming back; that Woojin guy should be able to take care of him until we can get him to Daegu. I'm calling Daewon right now; we're leaving as soon as the kids get here. Okay?"

Jeonghan nods even though his head is swimming and looks down as he feels Seungcheol's fist wrapped loosely around his wrist. His eyes are clear and dark, teeth gritted so hard it looks like they could break. "Cheol," Jeonghan whispers, sounding so broken to his own ears.

"I'm okay, angel," he murmurs back, voice strained and breathy, wincing as Joshua presses down on his collarbone with their hands. "Been through w-worse."

"Really?"

Seungcheol nods as best as he can, thumb stroking over Jeonghan's wrist bone. "I'll tell you about it later. Y-You're doing good, baby. Keep up the

pressure, okay?"

Jeonghan leans down and kisses his forehead, Cheol's hand tightening around his wrist. The thought of losing him steals his breath away, though Seungcheol isn't even his to lose. Not by a longshot. Still Jeonghan clings to him, one hand pressed to his wound, the other slick with his blood as he combs it through Cheol's hair. Still Jeonghan clings to him, kissing his forehead as he whispers senseless comforts, making promises he can't keep - *"you're okay, it's okay Cheollie, I'm not going anywhere"*. But he *wants* to keep these promises. Wants to soothe and reassure Seungcheol the way he always does with him, without a second thought.

When the boys return, he helps get Cheol into the backseat of one of Bang Chan's SUVs, sitting underneath his head as Woojin tries his best to patch him up for now. They'll get him proper care in Daegu, take the bullet out, get him a blood transfusion probably. But for right now, this is enough. The blood's already slowed and Cheol's breathing is evening out, his face relaxing. Yet he still winces every time they hit rough road and Woojin barks at the driver, Changbin if he remembers correctly, to be gentler, leaving Seungcheol to choke out a hardly convincing "it's okay". Jeonghan just runs his fingers through Cheol's hair as they drive, focusing on the man on his lap. Not Woojin's frantic movements, not the speed at which Changbin tears through the highway, not any of his thoughts. He just focuses on Seungcheol.

Seungcheol, who took a bullet for him without even thinking about it. Seungcheol, who touches him so gently, worries about him when he shouldn't. Seungcheol, who's entirely too good for him yet Jeonghan can't seem to let him go. Even in his most stubborn, selfish moments when all he wants is to shut Seungcheol out because he's too close, too deep, he can't let him go. It's as frightening as it is comforting, and he knows he's gone. He can try and deny it all he wants, but Seungcheol's burrowed under his skin like a thorn and there's no digging him out.

The worst part about it though?

Jeonghan's not sure he'd *want* to.

And he doesn't know what to make of that. Doesn't know what to make of the warmth spreading through his body every time Seungcheol calls him "angel" or "baby" with his hoarse, strained voice. Doesn't know what to make of the fear throbbing in the back of his mind.

"Hannie?"

He looks down at the croak Seungcheol makes, fingers immediately winding through his thick hair again. His heart contracts at the nickname and he tries to ignore it. "Shh, it's okay, Cheol. Just relax. We'll be there soon."

Seungcheol moves slowly, eyes half-lidded, as he reaches for one of Jeonghan's hands. Brings it to his mouth for soft kisses brushed along his knuckles, his fingertips, the lines of his palm. It's intimate, *too* intimate, but Jeonghan fights the urge to run away, to hide and pretend like he feels nothing. "Don't worry so much," Cheol whispers into his palm. "It's not good for you."

"Says the man with a bullet in his collarbones," Jeonghan murmurs.

"I'd rather it be there than - than lodged in your skull."

There's so much to unpack there, so much Jeonghan could focus on, and every single part of it scares him for a lot of different reasons. So he brushes it off, doesn't let it process. Just watches as Seungcheol continues to worship the skin of his hand with gentle kisses. Like he almost lost Jeonghan, the way Jeonghan almost lost him.

As if they have any claim to the other. As if they're something more than they are, hindered by the back and forth Jeonghan puts them through because he doesn't know how to deal with these feelings. Doesn't know how to get close to someone. He even keeps himself at arms' length with his men, with Chan, because that's so much easier than admitting weakness, than letting them know that he's struggling. The only person in the world who knows him like he knows himself is Joshua and that's because Joshua is the most stubborn man he's ever met. He worked hard, *works* hard to get under his defenses, through his walls. Though Seungcheol definitely gives him a run for his money, looking up at him with those beautiful eyes, plush lips brushing

against his skin. It's not fair that he cares this much when Jeonghan doesn't even know if he's capable of giving Seungcheol what he wants.

"What are you thinking about?" Cheol whispers against his knuckles.

"Nothing," he whispers back. "Just rest, Cheollie."

"I like it when you call me that," and there's a small smile on his face that's somehow more beautiful than the wide, gummy one he tends to wear.

Jeonghan just strokes his hair instead of responding, watching as the buildings get higher the closer they get to Daegu.

Notes for the Chapter:

nothing like your sorta kinda lover taking a bullet for you to make you realize you probably have feelings for them, as well as the fact that you're definitely emotionally constipated... or wait, is that just jeonghan?

so that happened. /checks chapter 3 and jeonghan's lil quip about cheol proving his loyalty by taking a bullet for him/ isn't foreshadowing fun? ....

also?? there's a rat?? or more than one?? that might be fun. later on. we'll come back to that when jeonghan isn't having a breakdown over his love for seungcheol uwu

thank you guys for your continued love and support, 2k hits is so amazing and i literally could not have done it without you! and also thank you for your kind comments; i love reading them and they always make my day! <3

Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

i had some issues with this chapter and where i wanted things to go so that's why it's a bit late BUT i worked things out!

also i had fallin' flower on repeat for the like 8 hours it took me to write this chapter so get ready for some soft gay.

tw: mentions of past rape/non-con, mentions of panic attacks, insecure/emotionally constipated jeonghan.

fourteen: somebody like me

Jeonghan's never been more tired in his life. Well really he probably *has* been, he's just too exhausted to really remember. But he can't sleep right now, even if he wanted to. Not with the way his mind is racing.

Seungcheol's okay. Passed out in this makeshift, underground medbay that sort of qualifies as a hospital room. It has all the important fixtures: bed, EKG machine, IV drip. But the lights are too dim and the air is missing that foreboding smell of bleach and sanitizer which Jeonghan loves the most about hospitals (he's being sarcastic, of course). At least Daewon's doctor is an *actual* doctor; a full-fledged surgeon and everything (not a med school drop-out like a certain Boo Seungkwan, bless his heart). She'd removed the bullet and stitched Seungcheol up no problem, even joking that she could do it onehanded with her eyes closed - which had done nothing to quell Jeonghan's anxiety. And then Jeonghan spent the better part of an afternoon hooked up to an IV drip, hanging on the edge of consciousness because Seungcheol needed blood.

And Jeonghan felt indebted to him.

But now that's over with; he's had some food and water to boost his blood sugar back up, it's nearing midnight, and Seungcheol's still resting. He hasn't

seen another conscious person in at least an hour, when the doctor left, which means he's been alone with his thoughts since then.

A dangerous game, really, with how exhausted and emotional he is.

"Yooseok's buddy could take over the way he's been wanting, I guess."

"Has Yooseok's friend heard from his contact at all?"

"...especially since I heard Yooseok's man's man works for the - "

So there's a rat. Most likely more than one. One of whom is gunning for Jeonghan's position and the other is helping him, feeding him information. Which means the former isn't part of Jeonghan's inner circle, and that's why he needs information. But that *also* means whoever's giving this bastard information is someone close to Jeonghan. Someone who knows him.

A thought, a name, an identity nags at the back of his mind but he won't let it through for fear of what it would do to him. Logically, he knows who that contact, that informant is. There's no one else it *could* be, but he's terrified of uttering it aloud because that will mean it's true. That he believes it.

Does he though? It just… it just doesn't make sense. How could Seungcheol actively betray him when he took a bullet for him this morning? He'd risked his life for Jeonghan, killed for him. He's friends with the other boys, another hyung to Chan. Has helped Jeonghan through panic attacks, watched over him that one night when he'd had a drunken breakdown. And they've - they've had sex, sort of. Seungcheol's seen a side of him not many people see, in that respect. In less than a month he's gone from someone Jeonghan hated to someone he can trust without really needing to think about it.

Except maybe that trust has been unfounded this whole time and that little part in the back of his mind that's told Jeonghan again and again not to trust him has been right. But he can't *stomach* that, not with all the evidence to the contrary. Not with Seungcheol laying unconscious a few feet from him, a hole in his collarbones. One that was meant for Jeonghan.

There's a buzzing in his pocket and Jeonghan slips his phone out, body deflating - in a good way - when he sees the caller ID. It's a call he's hardly been expecting, but it's welcome. So he accepts it, making sure to keep quiet so he doesn't wake Seungcheol.

"Mingyu," he murmurs.

"Hey hyung. Shua-hyung called to tell us all what happened." He sighs heavily, and he sounds tired; his voice is rough like he's been talking for a long time. Jeonghan can picture him, the way he inadvertently pouts when he's sleepy. "As soon as he hung up, I went over to your place to make sure Channie wouldn't be too worried. I know he's with Wonwoo-hyung but you know he's not always the best at… comfort, I guess? Anyway, they finally just went to bed and I wanted to call and see how you're doing."

"Me?" he asks, heart swelling at the thought of Mingyu dropping everything to check on Chan because *of course* he did. And there's a momentary pang of regret sliding down Jeonghan's throat because he'd ended things with Mingyu as easily as he'd started them, years ago. Because, like Seungcheol, Jeonghan doesn't deserve a man like Mingyu in his good graces. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

Mingyu sighs again, and it's one he's heard a lot from him. Usually when Mingyu thinks he's being too thick-headed. Which happens a lot more often than not. "Come on, hyung," he says quietly. "Cheol-hyung took a bullet for you. You *must* be worried. I-I know how close you two are."

This makes Jeonghan raise an eyebrow and he glances at Seungcheol snoozing away. He's not snoring like normal and Jeonghan's grateful for that. He's not sure he could deal with the noise. "Close? We're not close. He's my bodyguard and I guess we're friends but that's it."

Jeonghan's not sure who he's trying to convince more: himself or Mingyu.

"All right, hyung. But you're sure you're okay?"

He pauses and thinks. No, he's not okay. For so many reasons, none of which he can really process. But it's not the time nor the place to get into it

with Mingyu. "Yeah. I'm okay."

"Is hyung awake?"

"No, he's been resting since they got the bullet out."

"That's good," and he actually sounds *relieved.* Like he was worried about Seungcheol. "I'll pass the message along; Kwan's already jumping at the chance to go down there, even though everyone's been reminding him that Daewon's doc is an actual surgeon."

Jeonghan smiles a bit at the mention of the others, realizing just how much he's missed them the last couple days. Kwan, Seokmin, and Soonyoung and their silly humor and infectious laughter. Wonwoo and his quiet strength, always there when Jeonghan needs him, no matter what. Junhui and his charming smiles, his warm hugs. Minghao and the way he grounds Jeonghan, despite the fact that he's younger. Jihoon and Vernon, who never ask for more than what Jeonghan can give them. He adores every single one of them, and that's what makes this so hard. He would do *anything* for his men, has already done so much, but if Seungcheol truly is dangerous and not on their side… Jeonghan doesn't think he has the strength to remove him. Whatever that means.

And if one of *them* is the betrayer…

He clears away the lump in his throat, tries not to focus on the way his stomach is churning. "Thank you, Mingyu-yah."

"You sound far away," Mingyu murmurs, the way he would anytime they shared a bed post-sex and Jeonghan just laid there, lost in thought. It was always easier than talking, than letting Mingyu into the corner of his mind that forces himself to hide. "What's on your mind, hyung?"

"Actually," he says quietly, eyeing Seungcheol as he shifts a bit on the bed, "I… there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Shoot."

He takes a deep breath, looks down at the pallid stone floor beneath his boots. With everything else going on the last couple weeks, this had slipped his mind. But now that he has Mingyu here, now that it's late and he's already losing the battle against his emotions... "When - when we, er, *I* ended things… you said that you hadn't slept with anyone else while I was in prison."

The conversation comes rushing back to him; the unshed tears in Mingyu's eyes that he tried to pretend didn't exist, although for whose sake Jeonghan's not sure. He remembers the way he'd shut himself down, as if ending things with Mingyu, *hurting* him was as casual as ordering takeout. He remembers the empty feeling in his chest when Mingyu had left, the small smile he'd given to an oblivious Seungcheol and Chan on his way out. Like everything was okay.

I don't deserve him.

Breathing past the lump still in his throat, he continues. "That was - that was almost *three* years, Gyu. And at that point we'd only been sleeping together for like eleven months. S-so… why?"

Over Mingyu's silence, Jeonghan can hear Seungcheol's deep, even breathing and it's actually kind of relaxing. "You gonna make me say it?" Mingyu whispers, and Jeonghan wishes he were here. If only for comfort. He's always felt safe in Mingyu's big, strong arms, pressed against his chest. For someone so silly and young at heart, he's incredibly wise in a way Jeonghan never knew he needs. "I… I was in love with you. I have been since we were teenagers and being apart from you didn't - couldn't - change that."

As expected, Mingyu's words choke him up. Break his heart. He *knew* Mingyu felt that way, he'd be stupid not to, but to actually hear him say it out loud hurts. Jeonghan takes a moment, tries to swallow down his guilt. Tries to find his voice but what comes out is small and weak. "Are you still?"

"Do you really want to know, hyung?"

Jeonghan sighs heavily, head swimming even more than it was earlier. He can't latch onto anything coherent, anything concrete. Just *guilt.* Guilt over

Mingyu, guilt over Seungcheol getting shot, over not doing what he needs to do to protect his men. "Yes - no. I don't… fuck, I don't know. I'm… I'm so sorry, Ming - "

"Don't," he murmurs. "Please don't apologize, hyung. Feelings are weird, okay? And you don't really have control over them. You can't force yourself to love someone. So please don't apologize. I should've - really, I should've known."

That strikes a chord within Jeonghan, and he hates the apprehension that joins up beside the guilt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've always been closed off," Mingyu says quietly, voice crackling over the line. "And I totally get it. I mean, you have every reason to be. Sanghoon hurt you in a lot of ways. And-and you lost your mother so violently. And then… Shua-hyung told me what happened. In prison."

He should feel betrayed. But he doesn't because he knows Joshua. Knows he was probably coming from a place of worry and concern. Yet the fact that Mingyu knew knots his stomach even more. Because the last thing he wants is pity. Especially for *that.* "Mingyu…"

"I know you have your reasons for not telling me but… I wish you would have. I try my best to be there for you, hyung, I always have - "

"Why?" It comes out before he can stop it, borne out of insecurity and shame and Seungcheol unconscious with a bullet wound a few feet away; borne out of midnight worries and remorse.

"Why?" he repeats around a gentle sigh, the one he reserves for Jeonghan's thick-headedness. "I don't - well, because you deserve it. Because you… you deserve to be loved, as much as anyone else. And maybe all of us haven't been good at telling you that, I don't know. You just - you do so much for us, more than you should have to, and I want to return the favor in any way I can."

"Because you love me," Jeonghan whispers, hearing the broken catch in his voice.

“Because I love you,” Mingyu murmurs.

There’s silence between them for a few moments and Jeonghan blinks back the tears that threaten. He hasn’t cried all day, and he’s not starting now.

“Hyung?” Mingyu’s voice is quiet and he sounds so *young.* “Can I - can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t fuck this up,” he whispers, “with Cheol-hyung. I may not always be the smartest guy around, but I’m not stupid. I see the way he looks at you, how gentle he is with you. He could make you so happy, the way you deserve, but you have to let him. You have to let him in. And I know it’s not easy, I know you’re scared, but - “

He can’t help it. The tears break through before he can stop them and then he’s sobbing. Full-body ugly sobs he’s certain will wake Seungcheol up but he can’t hold them back. And he cries through Mingyu’s soft words of comfort, cries because he can’t believe it when Mingyu says everything will be okay. It won’t, it just *won’t,* and he’s not equipped to deal with that. But he needs to calm down; he can feel a panic attack edging through his tears, desperation trying to grasp at him. Claim him. So he breathes when Mingyu tells him to, pinches the skin between his fore and middle fingers until he’s all shuddering breaths and shaking hands.

“Yooseok’s men - “ he chokes - “they said something. Ab-about a couple rats. One of them feeding information to the other, and that he works for - for someone, or something. I-I don’t know who, Seungcheol shot him before he could continue. And I… I don’t want it to be *him,”* he croaks. “I ca - I *can’t.* It’ll hurt too much because I’m…”

He wipes furiously at his eyes, heart aching with the words he’s almost too scared to utter. The words, the thought, the *feelings* he’s been railing against for so long. But he says them anyway, whispers them to the still, cool air.

“I think I’m falling in love with him.”

Mingyu sighs.

“But if it’s not him that means it’s one of you eleven and I… I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“It’s gonna be okay, hyung.” He sounds like a broken clock, going back to the same moment, the same words. Jeonghan knows he’s trying to be comforting but… it’s not. Because nothing about this situation is okay.

"No it's not. It literally is *not* going to be okay and I - "

"Breathe, hyung."

Jeonghan does as he’s told, listening as his breaths even out from shallow and rushed to something deeper, a bit more normal. But he still feels anxious, fidgety. Itching to run. Hide.

"You trust him, don't you?" Mingyu asks after a moment.

It’s a loaded question with near infinite implications (or so it seems) and Jeonghan can’t focus on it. Can’t grasp its true meaning because it would mean choosing a side. And he’s not sure which is the losing one. "I, I don't - yes. I think so. I *want* to.”

“Then trust him.” Like it’s that easy. “If he *is* betraying you, like you think he is, why would he have taken a bullet for you?”

A valid point, and his mind jumps to the next one.

“But that would mean someone else is betraying me and I-I can’t - “

“All right, hey. Just breathe, hyung. Okay?”

Jeonghan nods even though he can’t be seen, and the more Mingyu talks the calmer he becomes. There’s something about his voice, the sweet, deep cadence of it that lulls Jeonghan into a state of something resembling relaxation.

"We'll talk about this when you get back to Seoul," Mingyu goes on. "Shua's already told Wonwoo-hyung to check around on everyone, just in case. So just rest and enjoy Daegu, as much as you can. Say hi to Jinki and Kibum-hyungs for me, okay? And… be nice to Cheol-hyung. Please. He needs you. And I know you need him."

Jeonghan doesn't know what to say to that, to any of this, so he doesn't. He just murmurs a "goodbye" and hangs up. Setting his phone on his lap, he looks over at Seungcheol's sleeping form. What is he supposed to do, if Seungcheol *is* betraying him? How is he supposed to know? Would Seungcheol tell him if he asked, point-blank? Or should he forsake Cheol's own trust in him and have Wonwoo look into him? Hack into his phone, his tablet, bug the car. Analyze every movement he makes, every breath he takes for any shred of evidence. Fuck, but Cheol's been trained for that by the NIS. He'd probably spot that from a mile away. And change his habits accordingly.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asks of the still, almost moldy air. Of Seungcheol's unconscious figure, curled up so small on the bed. His voice is shaky, feeble. Full of unshed tears. "Do I trust you, even though I've known you for less than a month? Fuck, I have no reason to do that, Seungcheol, except… you've done so much for me. For my men. For Chan. And I… I know I'm falling for you."

God. Saying it aloud is so scary, even the second time around.

"I might be denying it but I know it's real. And I don't know what to do."

His voice cracks on the last word and with that, the tears return. He tugs his legs up onto the chair, knees to his chest, and *cries*. The last time he felt this alone, this scared was… was in prison. When he'd been forced to do things he didn't want to do, to protect those he loves. It's a feeling he hates with his whole being, one that leaves him aching and empty and he wants it to *stop*. He can't do this. Can't be the leader his men need, can't make the hard decisions that will protect them. And himself. He needs to cut Seungcheol out, it's the only logical course of action since he's the most obvious choice to play traitor. But he *can't because* he needs him. Because he's catching

fucking feelings and Seungcheol is the only person that's ever made him feel this way.

And it's almost certain he's been deceiving Jeonghan - all of them - this entire time.

Somewhere above the rushing in his ears, Jeonghan hears rustling on the bed. A croak. He looks up to see Seungcheol trying to sit up, grimacing as he tries not to jostle his left side, the injured one. And Jeonghan wipes his eyes before he can be found out. If Seungcheol thinks anything's wrong…

Don't think about him that way right now.

"He needs you. And I know you need him."

So he takes a few shaky breaths to compose himself as he rises from the chair. "Hey, it's okay," he says quietly. "You're okay, Seungcheol."

"W-water," he wheezes in a cracked voice and Jeonghan reaches for the bottle left on the table near the bed, for this specific purpose. He's barely able to get it uncapped before Seungcheol takes it with his good hand and swallows half of it in a couple of gulps.

He doesn't look as bad as Jeonghan had been expecting. Actually all that rest, medically induced as it may have been, seems to have done him some good. Now they just need to focus on getting him healed up.

When he's finished with the water Jeonghan takes it back and lids it again, setting it back on the table. And for a moment neither of them speaks. Jeonghan's a bit taken aback at how quickly Seungcheol woke up; how quickly he has to face him now. And Seungcheol's gaze is too soft; it leaves Jeonghan's stomach twisting.

"You were crying," he whispers, but his voice sounds a bit smoother. "Is everything okay?" And then, probably trying to make Jeonghan feel better (but failing miserably) he asks, "Am I dying?"

"Fuck," Jeonghan mutters. "How could you even joke about that?"

“Defense mechanism I didn’t know I had,” he says around a shrug that leaves him wincing. And then he pats an empty space on the mattress, near his legs.

Jeonghan accepts the invitation without trying to think about it. “You’re gonna be fine. Doctor said the bullet just barely missed your - your, uh, subclavian artery? I think? I don’t know, Channie would probably know what I’m talking about. Either way, it could’ve been bad but it’s not. You’ll have a scar but that’s it, really.”

Seungcheol offers him a gentle smile and a stroke of his fingers over Jeonghan’s own. “How long have I been out?”

“Few hours, I think. It just passed midnight, so…”

“Did I miss much?”

It shouldn’t be this easy, talking to him with everything going on, with all of the doubt weighing Jeonghan down. But Seungcheol has a way of making him feel so safe that he can’t help it. So he settles in, back against the metal, wired footboard, and fills Seungcheol in on everything. That Joshua had taken care of business with Daewon so Jeonghan could stay here. That Bang Chan and his boys are settling in nicely, according to Joshua’s text from a while ago (he leaves out the part where Shua had all but begged him to come back to the hotel and sleep because if anything were to happen to Seungcheol, Daewon and his men could take care of it). That Mingyu called and the others know what went down. But he leaves it at that, deciding that Seungcheol doesn’t need to know the details of said phone call.

“Great,” he deadpans with a wry smile. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to see me when we get back.”

“Speaking of,” Jeonghan murmurs, and he looks down at his hands in his lap. “You can go home as soon as you’re up for it. I know you don’t like being here and - and now you’ve been shot and - “

“Jeonghan.”

His voice is gentle, and so is the bare foot tapping against Jeonghan's thigh in an attempt to get him to look up. It works and he smiles a bit when he meets Cheol's warm gaze. "I'm staying as long as you are. You can't get rid of me that easily."

Don't remind me. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

They sit in silence for a while, Jeonghan literally twiddling his thumbs, tugging at his other fingers, trying not to focus on how badly he wants to curl up against Seungcheol's strong chest. How good it would feel to be held by him amidst all this uncertainty. And something in him itches to *talk.* To tell Seungcheol how he feels because maybe if Seungcheol reciprocates, he can pretend what's between them is real. Sincere. But the rest of him screams at him to not do that. To retreat further inside himself to keep from getting hurt. If he severs that connection, the bond they share…

Losing Seungcheol like this would hurt. But at least he'd be protected. And so would his men.

"Seungcheol," he tries.

"I know what you're gonna say," he cuts in. "That I shouldn't have done… what I did."

"I… well, that's true. But not what I had in mind."

"Oh." Seungcheol shifts against the headboard and Jeonghan hears him wince. "What's on your mind, then? Must be a lot; you're really quiet."

He isn't sure how to word it; he knows he just needs to be direct and ask Seungcheol if he's working with someone to take him down. But he's terrified of the answer, whether it's "yes" or "no". "I… I can't stop thinking about what Yooseok's men said. About a 'buddy' and contacts and…" He trails off, sees Seungcheol shift again out of the corner of his eye.

“Ask what you’re gonna ask, Jeonghan,” he says quietly. A bit cold. Guarded.

With a sigh he looks up. Seungcheol’s watching him closely, eyes dark and slightly narrowed. Like he knows what’s about to come. And Jeonghan’s certain he does; it’s been hanging between them ever since they met, even after Seungcheol denied he was working with the NIS. Even after Seungcheol maintained his innocence in the face of threats.

He could’ve been lying then, his mind not so helpfully adds.

“Are you loyal to me?”

Those words, simple in their syntax, circuitous in their motive, burn the air between them and Seungcheol sets his face grimly. It’s a look Jeonghan saw often in their early days together, when Seungcheol would challenge him on everything. It’s a look he doesn’t miss, one that knots up his insides. And when Seungcheol opens his mouth to speak, Jeonghan’s hurt is pounding so loud he almost misses his words.

Almost.

“You’d think the gunshot wound in my collarbone would be answer enough.”

It fills Jeonghan with dread because *he’s being vague.* He’s not responding straight on and all Jeonghan wants is for Seungcheol to look him in the eyes and pledge his loyalty. It’s a weak fantasy, since any NIS agent worth their salt knows how to bullshit through a simple lie, but he needs it. Needs to at least pretend everything isn’t falling apart around him. “Answer the question,” he snaps.

“Yes,” he responds immediately. Big, brown eyes locked on Jeonghan, nothing near a lie in sight. “I’m loyal to you, Jeonghan. I have been since the moment I found your father’s corpse. I’ve been loyal through everything - the threats, the arguments, the sex. Those moments when you were vulnerable even though you didn’t want to be. I was loyal yesterday in that warehouse. I was loyal bleeding out in the back of Bang Chan’s SUV. I’m loyal right now, sitting in this - this room and I - “

It's enough for Jeonghan and he's tired of holding back, of pretending he's not aching for Seungcheol's touch, his affection. His love. He doesn't care about anything else right now; nothing else matters because he *believes* Seungcheol. It's a mistake, he's almost sure of it, but nonetheless he believes him. Jeonghan lunges forward, as best as he can without jostling Seungcheol, tears in his eyes as he reaches for him. And Seungcheol holds him so impossibly tight, in a way that must be torture for his injury, but he doesn't say anything about it. Just crushes Jeonghan to him, soothing his tears with gentle strokes up and down his back, words of warmth and comfort murmured to the top of his head.

"I thought I might lose you," he chokes out between sobs, wetting Seungcheol's t-shirt with his tears. "And I couldn't - I couldn't - "

"Shh, it's okay, Hannie. You didn't lose me. I'm right here, okay?"

He nods, shifting to bury his face in the crook of Seungcheol's neck. Breathes him in, even though he smells like sweat and blood and the remnants of gunpowder. It's still comforting, still endearingly *Seungcheol,* and it's enough. "I need you."

"I know," he breathes near Jeonghan's ear. "I'm here. Just breathe, baby. Breathe, okay?"

Seungcheol's chest rises and falls with his and soon Jeonghan's breathing easier. Soon his sobs subside and he's just trembling in Seungcheol's arms, feeling so small and - and vulnerable. But he's *safe,* because Seungcheol's here.

"Thank you for staying with me," Cheol whispers, hands still rubbing comforting shapes into Jeonghan's back. Like *he's* the injured one. "And for the blood."

Jeonghan blushes, despite himself, and shifts so they can look at each other. "How'd you know?"

One of his hands finds its way to the crook of Jeonghan's right elbow and he strokes along the cotton ball taped there. "Kinda hard to miss, angel."

He hesitates at the pet name, like he's afraid of pushing too far, but the sound of it sends a pang of warmth through Jeonghan's body. "It was the least I could do. You - you would've done the same for me."

"I would."

Their eyes meet in the low light, Seungcheol's hands warm and big and stroking embers into his skin. Everything in Jeonghan's mind and body is crying at him to get out, to hide before he shows too much of himself. But deep down, beneath all of that, this feels *right*. Resting in Seungcheol's arms after everything that happened today, after his conversation with Mingyu. He's scared but it… it feels nice.

Like he's *alive.*

Like he's finally breathing.

"Can I tell you something?" he murmurs. "And you have to promise not to interrupt or - or anything. Okay?"

Seungcheol nods. "You can tell me anything, Jeonghan."

It takes a few moments for the words to make it from his brain to his mouth, but when they get there he can't stop them.

"I know you care about me," he starts with a whisper. "A lot. I mean, it'd be obvious to anyone. And I... I know why. I get it. I'm - I didn't want you to see those sides of me. I didn't want you to see my panic attacks or-or know that I'd been assaulted in prison or how much I love Chan and... all my shit with my father. But being my bodyguard - well of course you'd see it. It's my own goddamn fault."

He smiles tiredly, sees Seungcheol return it, and it spurs him on. But he doesn't go any louder than a whisper, like he's afraid the cool, still air will hear his secrets and hold onto them.

"So I get why you care about me. Why you like me a lot. You're a good man, Seungcheol. Better than me, better than any of us. And everything in my

mind, my body, and my soul is screaming at me to stop. To just put as much distance between us as I can so that I don't get hurt. It's so much easier to just - just shut down instead of opening myself up to possibly losing everything." He takes a breath, pushing away his doubt and anxiety because this needs to come out. He needs to say it. "And then my heart... God. I'm tired of being alone. I want to be with someone. But I'm so scared. I don't wanna get hurt."

In his silence, Seungcheol takes a breath. "Can I say something?"

Jeonghan nods, unable to help the way his heart thuds in his chest.

"What makes you think I'd hurt you, angel?"

It's a good question, and Jeonghan closes his eyes at it. There are so many reasons, some tangible and justifiable, others more absurd and simply a product of anxiety, of his upbringing. But right now, in the face of Seungcheol's gentle question, he can't think of a single one. "I… that's the way this life goes," he murmurs weakly. "It's not fair to anyone, especially those who are vulnerable, who allow themselves to be loved. This life takes and it takes until there's nothing left. I've seen it happen so many times, I-I know it's happening to *me…"*

He trails off into a choked sound because he's never said that aloud before. But he knows this all is slowly killing him, stripping away his will to keep going because he never wanted this for himself.

And he doesn't want that for Seungcheol.

He might've made the decision to do this after deciding the NIS and a life of abiding by the law weren't good enough, but there's no way he'll be able to stay. He's too kind, too gentle, too loving. Too trusting. God and these thoughts only add to Jeonghan's anxiety. There's no way he and Seungcheol will ever work out. In any way. At least, so he's convinced himself.

But something in him, beneath all the hesitation, the pain, the desire to protect himself, *aches* to try. He wants to open himself up, wants to let Seungcheol *love* him because he's spent far too long in his mind, in the part of himself

that tells him he's not worth it. That he's not worth attention and tenderness from someone like Choi Seungcheol.

"I'm scared," he whispers.

"I know you are, angel." His comfort is immediate and all-enveloping, as it always is. "But it's okay. I'd do anything to keep you safe, and I'd never hurt you if I had the choice."

Silence descends between them, then, for a moment or two. Seungcheol brushes his hair from his eyes with gentle fingers that graze his forehead and Jeonghan tries not to melt. He doesn't let people touch him like that. Mingyu always knew not to because Jeonghan would pull away. And all of his other "partners" - fuck buddies, really - never did because to them, it was never more than sex. To Jeonghan, it was never more than sex. But now he's caught feelings and he's *so* touch-starved. Like he's gone his entire life without affection.

"Can I tell you something, angel?" Cheol whispers.

He nods against his shoulder.

"It's not bad to open up to people, to get close to them. I know it's easy but you lose so much that way, too. It's no way to live." He pauses, fingers tracing Jeonghan's spine through his shirt, and then he sighs. "I... I watched my eomma do it for almost twenty years and it hurt us both. She felt like she couldn't trust anyone, after my father and the shit he and - and this whole gang put us through. She didn't have close friends or boyfriends or anything. Just me and her job. And I'd listen to her crying at night, when she thought I was asleep, because she was so alone but she was terrified. And then she met my future stepdad a few years ago and... she decided she'd had enough of being on her own. Of shutting down when people tried to get close."

Jeonghan had never met Choi Miseon, he'd only heard of her through stories told by her husband, by Sanghoon and Jaesung, but he always respected her. Risking everything to leave this life for her son (even though it would end up being in vain, ultimately), all the shit she'd been through. And to hear that

she was a lot like *him,* that she'd struggled with opening up and being vulnerable just like Jeonghan…

Knowing that Seungcheol had someone else like that in his life, that he'd probably been as patient with her as he is with Jeonghan…

"I didn't know that," he whispers.

Seungcheol nods and when he speaks again his voice is tight, thick with emotion. "She... All this really fucked her up. She'd have panic attacks sometimes and I…"

It's starting to make sense, now. Why Seungcheol is the way he is. Why he's able to calm Jeonghan down and bring him through his worst moments. "You were there for her," he murmurs.

"That's why I helped you through your panic attack because I know how scary they can be. And no one should have to endure one. Especially alone."

Jeonghan doesn't know what to say (once again), so he just whispers the first thing that comes to mind. "I… I was so worried about you today."

"I know you were, angel. But you were so brave, with everything. The kids and Yooseok's guys and - and me. You were brave and strong and I'm so proud of you."

I don't deserve him.

"Why?"

Just like with Mingyu, his voice is small and insecure but he can't help it.

Seungcheol is quiet for a few moments, fingers still tracing shapes into his back. "You... I know none of this is easy for you but you're taking it all in stride."

Am I?

“You're different from your father but you're as good a leader as he was. No one stands a chance against you, Han. All this shit with Yooseok - we'll get him. *You'll* get him. And all this - this heartache and hurt... you'll find a way past it too."

He sounds so confident, it's hard not to believe him. “You think so?"

“I know so, Hannie. And I…” He takes a breath, hands stilling on Jeonghan's body. “If you'll have me... I want to be here with you for it.”

He doesn't say it, but Jeonghan catches the hidden meaning between his words - that he wants to be there as something *more* than bodyguard. He's asking Jeonghan to let him in, to be with him. He's giving him the choice. “Why?” he asks again.

“I don't know,” Seungcheol whispers, grip tightening around him. “But I haven't felt this way about someone - well, ever. Not even in the few relationships I've had. Trust me, I'm scared too. Three weeks or so ago I hated you. And now here I am, bullet hole in my collarbone, clinging to you because the thought of letting you go is... is scary. You found a way inside me - "

The more he talks, the more Jeonghan's mind fights against him, the more he wants to crawl away and hide, and he doesn't know how to process this. So he bites out, “That sounds ridiculous.”

There's a brief, heart-stopping moment where he thinks he's pissed Seungcheol off - but then he laughs. That dumb laugh that sounds like sunshine, that warms Jeonghan from the inside out like nothing else. He winces through it, a bit wheezy, and Jeonghan clings to the sound.

“Here I am,” Cheol says, “baring my soul to you, and you say *that?”*

Jeonghan can't help himself, he giggles into Seungcheol's shoulder. “Oh come on, it does! You sound like you're in a drama."

“Oh, what about you Mr. ‘oh my heart and my soul and my mind’ - "

“Fine,” he giggles again. “We can *both* be in a drama.”

Cheol chuckles softly, fingers resuming their stroking, and his breathing sounds so loud in the quiet that follows. From his perch on Seungcheol’s right shoulder, Jeonghan can make out his heartbeat and it’s comforting.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I just - emotions make me uncomfortable and you’re so good at them and I just..."

“Don’t be sorry. I’ll move at any pace you want."

Jeonghan knows he means that, and he sighs. “You’re too good to be true, Seungcheol."

“No. I just care about you. And I - as cheesy as it sounds, I meant what I said. All the shit we've been through together in the last few weeks, everything I've seen you go through... it's completely changed the way I feel about you. In a good way. And maybe it's moving too fast, maybe I feel more than I should, but... I’m not giving up on you. I swear."

It’s dangerous and terrifying but the desire to trust, to be loved (no matter how fleeting) wins out over everything else and Jeonghan lifts his head from Seungcheol’s shoulder. They’re eye-level now, gazing at each other with half-lidded warmth. Cheol’s hands come to hold his waist as Jeonghan effectively straddles him, reaching out to cup Seungcheol’s jaw. His stubble scratches Jeonghan’s palm, and it’s so *real.* Seungcheol’s real, he’s here, holding him, promising to stay by his side, and even though Jeonghan shouldn’t believe him he’s so tired. So unbelievably tired and just for tonight, it would be so easy to give in.

So he does.

The kiss is soft, nothing more than a chaste press of their lips, yet it brings something to life inside Jeonghan. It’s different than any other kiss they’ve shared - those were all rough and demanding, born out of lust and punishment. This one is a promise, a promise neither of them can keep but they’re swearing it anyway. And when they pull back Seungcheol’s holding him so tight.

“Stay with me,” he whispers.

Jeonghan responds with a kiss brushed against the corner of Cheol’s lips.

They shift then, coming apart so Seungcheol can lay down and Jeonghan can rest at his side, head on his chest. For once in his life, he doesn’t want any more than this. There’s no desire for sex, to bury himself in sweaty skin and heated whispers to push back his emotions. For once in his life, this is enough.

He doesn’t know what will await them when they wake up, when they return to Seoul in a few days. But that doesn’t matter because Seungcheol’s *here*. When everything else is falling apart, Seungcheol is solid, something Jeonghan can hold onto. So he clings to him, and they fall asleep like that.

Notes for the Chapter:

fucking FINALLY. y'all i'm tired. this has been 80k words, like... why.

uhh follow me on twitter if you guys want @scoups__ahoy! i can't promise i'll be super active but i'll try my very best!

thank you, as always, for reading! i never thought this would reach 2.5k hits, nor did i think this would get as much love as it has. so thank you guys! stay safe and healthy! <3

Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

got another long one today!

tw: mentions of past non-con

enjoy! <3

fifteen: breath of life

Over the next few days, Seungcheol heals. Jeonghan tries his best to stay at his side in the hotel room but, unfortunately, duty calls. So he ends up spending most of his time in meetings with Daewon, Joshua, and/or Bang Chan; after that come phone and video calls with Wonwoo as he updates him on the status of his "investigation", an investigation that's going as well as they'd thought it would. AKA, nothing has turned up on the other members and Jeonghan insisted on not digging into Seungcheol because if he trusts him, then everyone else should too. That, and maybe he's scared. Still in denial. So to get his mind off of the anxiety Wonwoo's news always brings, he's with Kibum and Jinki the rest of the time, helping them make last minute preparations for their wedding. So by the time he gets home to Seungcheol every night, Cheol's usually asleep.

And a part of Jeonghan is actually sort of glad for that. He'd be lying if he said the words and soft touches he and Seungcheol shared a few nights ago hadn't scared him. But he's trying to move past it, trying to let himself be vulnerable with him. It's just not helpful when he gets home at like midnight and passes out next to Seungcheol's warm, snoring self almost immediately; and then when he wakes up he has barely enough time to change Cheol's bandage and make sure he's eating before he has to leave. That's hardly conducive to a stable relationship, but Cheol doesn't really seem to mind. Mostly because every time Jeonghan sees him he's either passed out or hopped up on pain meds or something.

That's beside the point, really. And the point *is* - Jeonghan doesn't know where they stand now, since they haven't been able to talk about it. Are they boyfriends? Still friends but in some weird limbo where Seungcheol peppers his face with kisses in the morning and calls him baby? Whatever they are, it… it kind of makes Jeonghan feel all warm. But not in the sexual way he's used to; it's a softer warmth, like leftover embers from a fire. Gentle in their intensity, yet still capable of burning, singeing. It's new and not entirely unwelcome. Even if it's unnerving.

"Enjoying yourself, Han?"

Jinki's voice tugs him from his reverie and everything sort of comes back into focus. Oh yeah: the wedding. He's been here for at least a couple hours, most of which has been spent at the open bar downing some combination of water and fruit. He *wants* to get drunk but promised Seungcheol (who's waiting up for him) that he wouldn't.

So he's not.

With a heavy sigh he looks at Jinki as he takes a seat beside him. He's incredibly handsome in his black suit (contrasting purposely with Kibum's white one) and with his dark hair styled out of his eyes like that, he looks like the average, everyday groom, not some club owner with ties to the biggest gang in Korea. It's endearing, and a surge of warmth completely unrelated to Seungcheol pulls at his heart. Even though he's here alone, he's glad he's here to begin with. That his prison sentence didn't overlap with it. "Yeah," he says quietly, not certain how convincing it sounds. "I just…"

"You have a lot on your plate, I get it," Jinki says with a smile. It's a sweet smile but it doesn't last long, morphing into something a bit more wicked. Something that reminds him of Kibum. "And a boyfriend at the hotel, I hear?"

Jeonghan blushes, groaning when Jinki elbows him good-naturedly. This is why he missed these two more than he thought he did; with them he's not Yoon Jeonghan, crime lord. He's just Jeonghan, dongsaeng they love to tease. "He's not my… I don't know. Maybe. We haven't talked about it yet."

“Shua says he took a bullet for you.”

Jeonghan glares across the room at his best friend, who offers him a grin as he talks with Amber and Kibum on the dance floor. “He did. But it was just because he’s my bodyguard.”

“Oh,” Jinki smirks, drawing out the word into several syllables. “So your boyfriend is also your bodyguard? I’m sure that has its perks.”

He curses under his breath as his face heats up. But it’s nice, being teased like this. Like he’s a *normal* person. “I wouldn’t know. If we’re dating it’s only been for a couple days. And even then we’ve barely had time to be with each other.”

Jinki quietly orders a drink for himself and then he sits silently, eyes scanning the crowd. Jeonghan follows his gaze; there are a lot of people he recognizes vaguely (several of whom have already come up to him and offered their condolences and the first few times Jeonghan was very confused, until he remembered that it’s been maybe a month since his father died), and a handful he has no idea who they are. But they’re all here in some capacity for Jinki and Kibum, packing the venue with noise. Dancing, laughing, drinking. Enjoying themselves.

What’s that like?

Jeonghan chastises himself for the morbid thought; he’s not some down-on-his-luck teen in a drama.

“You’ve never been the boyfriend type, you know,” Jinki says in that way that sounds ambiguously like a talking-to, like Jeonghan’s his kid and they’re going to have a deep discussion about things. It’s a tone he’s used to, having been Jinki and Kibum’s “adopted” son (and Amber’s) for years now. “I mean, there was that kid when you were fifteen, what was his name?”

“Minhyuk,” and Jeonghan remembers losing his virginity to him (social construct as it is) because it got his mind off things. Things like his mother’s murder and his father’s apathy.

“Ah, that’s right. I met him once. He was… nice.”

“Was he?”

It was meant to be self-deprecating, a dark joke created to produce a few pity chuckles, but then Jeonghan realizes he doesn’t actually remember.

“And then all those other boys. And Daewon. Mingyu.” A grin suddenly cuts through his somber facade and he takes a sip of his newly made drink. “That week where you and Shua - “

“Don’t remind me,” Jeonghan groans, pretending like his mood isn’t sinking more and more with each name Jinki mentions. “Is this going somewhere, hyung?”

He’s quiet again, looking out at the sea of people before them once more. “I know things haven’t been easy for you. Like, ever. But I’m proud of you, Jeonghan-ah. And the few times I’ve met this guy, he seems… really good. Not just in general; he’ll be really good for *you.”*

Jeonghan can’t stop the warmth that spreads through his body at Seungcheol’s mention and he masks it with a long sip of water. “You think so?”

“I know so,” he responds a lot more firmly than Jeonghan thought. “So I guess my point is don’t get too into your mind with this, okay? He’s a good man and you deserve to be happy.”

“He could make you so happy, the way you deserve…”

“People keep telling me that lately,” Jeonghan murmurs around the rim of his glass of water, watching gleeful couples take to the floor as the DJ plays some ballad. It’s one he recognizes from Seungcheol’s playlist. “Not sure if I believe it.”

Jinki nods. “It’s definitely easier said than done. But I know you can do it.”

Jeonghan wants to break, to tell Jinki everything that’s been going on. But he knows it’s just a defense mechanism his brain keeps pushing. If a single person is able to validate his doubts then he’ll end things with Seungcheol,

no hesitation. If someone else thinks there's a chance he'll get hurt, he'll put that wall back up without a second thought. So he keeps his mouth shut.

Jinki pats his leg. "Go on, kiddo. Get out of here. I know you'd rather be with Seungcheol than be here." When Jeonghan looks at him, Jinki grins in the way that squeezes his eyes shut. "And I doubt Kibum wants you here if you're not drunk off your ass."

He hears the sentiment behind Jinki's words, the care and affection hiding in them, and it's enough to push him off his seat. His legs and ass are a bit numb with how long he's been sitting and it feels good to stretch. With a gentle sigh he looks at Jinki again. "I'm happy for you two, hyung."

"Thank you, Jeonghan-ah."

After throwing Joshua, Kibum, and Amber a smile and a wave goodbye, he's heading out, excitement thrumming through his veins. He doesn't miss Joshua's happy grin.

He grabs some takeout on the way home, at Cheol's text insistence, and before he knows it he's walking into their now-shared hotel room as best as he can with a couple bags of food hanging off his wrists.

"Why'd you leave so early?" Seungcheol asks as soon as the door's closed, wincing as he tries to push himself into a sitting position against the headboard.

Jeonghan sets the food down on the table and immediately comes over to help him, a few half-hearted scolds he doesn't mean leaving his lips in the process. "I told you, dummy. I missed you." The blush on Seungcheol's face is enough to make it all worth it, the push and pull, the brooding, the doubts, and he leans in for a forehead kiss.

"I missed you too, Hannie."

His eyes linger on Jeonghan, on the suit he wears, and Jeonghan smiles. Truth be told, he's definitely bummed they didn't get time together at the wedding because he packed this suit partially for himself, and partially for Seungcheol. It's one of his favorites: all black and tight-fitting, with lace detail along the sleeves and waist of the jacket. He always pairs it with the same high-necked lace shirt beneath it and adds a tie to make it actually formal. And he knows he looks good in it, if only by the way Seungcheol looks at him, eyes roaming his body (when he first saw him in it earlier, Seungcheol had called him beautiful and pulled him close for a deep kiss, the kind that made his head spin; the kind that promised something more). Part of Jeonghan wants to stay in this suit, just to tease him, but it's also several million won and he'd never forgive himself if he got food on it. So he changes into a pair of his own sweatpants and one of Cheol's shirts before settling next to him on the bed.

They eat there, as close as they can get without Jeonghan actually being in his lap, pressed against his good side. And when Cheol's collarbones start aching too badly to the point where he can't lift his arms well, Jeonghan feeds him. Straight up feeds him, from his own chopsticks no less, and the domesticity isn't lost on him. It actually feels really nice, and when they finish Jeonghan shifts down to lean his head on Seungcheol's good shoulder, as gingerly as he can.

"I wanted to dance with you," he murmurs without prompt, the words spilling out from a mix of their close proximity and the words of others, telling him to be happy. It's something he's willing to at least try. "They played a lot of slow songs and I watched everyone else dance but…"

Seungcheol presses a kiss to the crown of his head. "We could dance now, angel."

"You're injured," he says, pretending the thought doesn't make him warm all over.

"So?" He gently nudges Jeonghan. "Come on, let's get up."

Fighting back a sigh at standing up when he was just getting comfy, Jeonghan watches as Cheol plays around on his phone for a moment. And then their

room is filled with the soft plinking of a piano. It's one of the songs Jeonghan's heard most from this playlist, probably Cheol's favorite, and he hates the grin that touches his lips as Seungcheol approaches him.

"This is incredibly lame," he says, reaching for him nonetheless.

"It's *fun,"* Seungcheol murmurs, one of his strong hands finding its way to his lower back. They press together, like they have a couple times before, yet there's nothing sexual about this encounter. It's just them and the music. "I wanted to dance with you too, Jeonghan."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He blushes and leans forward, ducking his head onto Seungcheol's good shoulder. And for about four minutes, they stay like that. Swaying gently to the music, Seungcheol's strong hands holding him so close, the warmth of his breath and his body easing Jeonghan into calm. Peace. Near his ear Cheol hums in a soft baritone and every so often he'll brush kisses into Jeonghan's skin. Kisses meant to comfort, to soothe. They're so close, closer than they've been in - well, ever. Because they've never *been* close like this before. With them it's always been rough and punishing touches, keeping each other at arm's length even with Seungcheol's hand around his dick. But now there's nothing between them and Jeonghan never thought something like that could feel so freeing.

When the song ends, plunging the room into silence again, Seungcheol makes a noise but neither of them moves to leave each other's embrace. This feels right and Jeonghan wants to stay like this.

And then Seungcheol's hands turn a bit more insistent against his back, his kisses a bit more urgent as they trail up Jeonghan's neck. It leaves a familiar heat pooling in his gut and he clings to Seungcheol.

"We shouldn't," he murmurs, not meaning what he's saying. "You're hurt and - and you could rip your stitches or - "

“I don’t care if you don’t,” he whispers, lips finding Jeonghan’s pulse. He sucks there and Jeonghan’s legs go weak, breathing catching in his throat. *Fuck.* “I couldn’t stop thinking about you while you were gone. How badly I wanted to get you out of that suit. Jeonghan…”

He pulls away even though his body screams at him to *not,* to just lose himself. Seungcheol’s eyes are darkening, half-lidded, and that in and of itself sends a shiver of pleasure down Jeonghan's spine. It’s a look *very* familiar to him and with it come memories of hot touches and harsh kisses, orgasms that left him trembling and dazed. With it comes a promise of something similar, bolstered by the budding intimacy they share now. He wants Seungcheol more than he’s ever wanted him before. Wants *all* of him, next to him, around him, inside him. This won’t be like the last times with him. This won’t be like the times Jeonghan’s had before, with countless men in his bed to distract him from the world.

No, this time it will mean something.

Something fizzles in the back of his mind, a memory that seems so far away, yet it was maybe a few weeks ago. The two of them in Jeonghan’s bedroom, Jeonghan damp and naked from a shower that didn’t do much to squash the hangover that’d been wracking his body, Seungcheol sincere and tired, imploring Jeonghan with those soft eyes of his.

“If you want me, tell me.”

How difficult that had seemed, even though they’d had sex for the first time later that day. How much those words had scared him, angered him into staying walled up. Jeonghan doesn’t break. He doesn’t ask for sex, doesn’t ask to be wanted. No, he’s worshipped by each man he's ever allowed into his bed: Minhyuk, Daewon, Mingyu, the others whose names and faces he’s long since forgotten. And in return they merely get the honor of being with Yoon Jeonghan like that.

But Seungcheol?

He’s more than that, always has been even if Jeonghan didn’t want to believe it. Even if it scared him. Jeonghan draws in a deep breath and reaches out

for him. Without a moment lost, Seungcheol takes him back. Holds him so close.

“I want you,” Jeonghan whispers and he knows Seungcheol catches the deeper meaning in his words. “I want you, Seungcheol.”

He responds with a soft kiss, just a gentle press of their lips, holding Jeonghan’s head in his hands. It’s a lot like the kiss they shared the other night, in Seungcheol’s hospital bed - tender and gentle, promising so much more than they can give, and Jeonghan wants to lose himself in it. Eventually, it becomes something more; mouths slotting together, tongues coiling, hands roaming for any bare skin they can find. Yet it stays slow, and Jeonghan’s stomach still knots into a tight heat at the way Seungcheol touches him, the way he handles him. Like he’s afraid Jeonghan might fall apart in his hands.

When they break apart Seungcheol tugs at the hem of Jeonghan’s shirt, and Jeonghan lifts it over his head in the same breath. They share another kiss, and it’s a little more desperate as Cheol brushes reverent touches along his skin. Every stroke of Cheol’s fingers, every tease of his thumbs against Jeonghan’s nipples; every open-mouthed kiss pressed to his neck ignites a fire he’s never felt before deep in his body, and soon he’s clinging to Seungcheol, begging for more in a haze of pleasure.

And Seungcheol does as he’s asked.

Jeonghan’s sweats come off next, boxers following, and then Seungcheol takes his cock in his hand. A broken gasp leaves Jeonghan’s lips and his eyes fall shut, desire racing like electricity through his veins. Seungcheol touches him slowly, thumb stroking over the tip, collecting the precome that leaks there. It makes the slide easier and Jeonghan almost falls apart with Seungcheol’s fist tight around his cock.

“Remember the first time I touched you like this?” Cheol breathes, hot and heavy, near his ear, and the sound of his voice thick and deep with want makes Jeonghan arch in his arms.

And of *course* he remembers; the memory of Seungcheol's hands on him that first time fueled many other fantasies he's had since. But he can't find the words to say this; instead he just moans.

Seungcheol gets the gist apparently, because he groans softly in response, between kisses along Jeonghan's jawline, stroking his cock as slowly as he'd kissed him. It's somehow everything Jeonghan needs, even though he's so used to quick and rough and punishing. It's everything he needs because it's *Seungcheol.* "You're so good, angel," Cheol whispers. "So good for me. Shit, I can't wait to be inside you."

Jeonghan wants that too, *needs* him inside him, but he can't form the words still. So he babbles something about "please fuck me, Cheollie, please", and it seems to do the trick. Seungcheol pulls back and brushes a few gentle kisses along Jeonghan's cheek, the corner of his lips.

"We need lube," he murmurs, "and condoms. I'll get set up in here if you wanna go get them."

Jeonghan nods numbly, not even really sure what he's agreeing to, and then he's slipping into a hotel robe and heading next door with a very noticeable boner. The whole situation makes him stop and giggle softly for a moment. Maybe fifteen minutes ago, he and Seungcheol were sitting side by side in bed, finishing up the last of their dinner, and now he's achingly hard, digging through his suitcase for the condoms and lube he'd brought. Hoping Joshua doesn't come home for at least an hour (preferably longer). But Jeonghan's *happy.* Happy he and Seungcheol are finally doing this. Happy that they're - whatever they are, boyfriends, lovers. It doesn't really matter because he and Seungcheol are together.

And he's happy about it.

When he comes back to Seungcheol's room, Jeonghan finds him cleaning up their dinner mess - completely naked. It's a sight to behold, really, one that he's never had the chance to fully appreciate before so he takes that moment now. Leans against the closed door and watches Seungcheol move around the room. If Jeonghan's being honest one of the things that first attracted him to Seungcheol was how ridiculously *thick* he is - in his arms, his thighs, his

back, his chest. He likes how untoned Cheol is, despite the presence of muscle; the way he kinda jiggles when he walks, the little pouch in his stomach and holy *fuck* Jeonghan can't wait to just worship him. To take his time with Seungcheol, return the affection he's given so freely over the last few days.

With a smirk beneath red cheeks and ears, Seungcheol turns around and Jeonghan tries his best to keep his gaze up around his face, rather than the half-hard erection between his legs. "Enjoying the view?" Cheol asks, voice husky.

Hearing him like that *does things* to Jeonghan and he bites his lip as he lets his eyes roam Seungcheol's front. A rough scar on his lower stomach, off to the side of his navel, catches Jeonghan's attention. It's most definitely a gunshot wound and something hitches in Jeonghan's throat at the sight of it. That's two for him apparently, and Jeonghan remembers reading about it way back when, in a report Wonwoo had compiled for him a few months ago. It'd been right after Seungcheol joined them and Jeonghan sat in his prison cell, contraband phone in his hands, reading about this mystery former NIS agent, Choi Jaehwan's prodigal son. How he'd been shot after his first NIS case, taking a bullet for another agent without a second thought.

According to the official report.

Truth be told, Jeonghan should've known then that Seungcheol would be trouble. That he was too good and he'd worm his way through Jeonghan's defenses and straight into his heart. Because the only people that get shot in place of others, without even thinking about it; the only people who risk their lives for others without hesitation are a whole other breed, and even though Jeonghan has plenty of them under his authority they're borne that way out of loyalty, out of obligation. But Seungcheol hadn't been.

Jeonghan should've known.

"Jeonghan?"

He shakes his head a bit as he comes out of his thoughts, registering Seungcheol approaching him. In a moment he's back in Cheol's strong arms,

surrounded by his warmth, and he leans in for a barely-there kiss.

“You okay?” Cheol asks against his lips.

“Yeah. Just thinking.” He reaches out and gently touches the scar on his stomach. It’s rough and raised under his fingers, and he strokes it slowly. Seungcheol’s breath catches in his throat, muscles twitching beneath Jeonghan’s touch. “You’ve been shot before.”

He nods quietly, eyes downcast. “Guess I’ve made a habit of it.”

“You know,” Jeonghan murmurs as he skims his hand down to Seungcheol’s hip, edging closer to his hardening cock. He wants to touch him *so* badly; wants him in his hands. In his mouth. “Scars are sexy.”

Cheol laughs softly, a breathy giggle, and he seeks Jeonghan out for another kiss. His eyes flick beside Jeonghan’s gaze, no doubt finding the scar he has himself there. “That right?”

“I should know; I’ve slept with a lot of scarred up guys.” With that he disrobes, the lube and condoms joining the plush material on the floor, blushing when he catches Seungcheol’s eyes roaming his naked body.

“Maybe you just have a thing for dangerous guys.”

His voice has lowered a couple octaves and it sends a hot pang of pleasure straight to Jeonghan’s cock. And he bites his lip, watching how Seungcheol’s eyes darken and narrow. It’s a look a lot more familiar to Jeonghan, one that reminds him of a far less affectionate Seungcheol, and excitement thrums in his veins. “Maybe I do. Maybe you do too.”

“You *are* dangerous, Jeonghan,” he agrees softly, reaching out to take his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes drop to Jeonghan’s mouth and he licks his own lips. A shiver runs through Jeonghan’s body and he needs Seungcheol, more than he’s ever needed anything. “And I think I’m falling in love with you.”

He whispers it like a prayer, hushed and desperate, and Jeonghan can't say anything back. Doesn't *want* to say anything back for fear of ruining this moment. He feels the same, and Seungcheol has to know it too, somehow. Because he's Seungcheol and he knows Jeonghan well even though they've been in each other's lives for such a short time. So Jeonghan surges forward and captures Seungcheol's mouth in a rough, deep kiss. It's response enough, for now, and Jeonghan presses into him to push him back towards the bed. Desire is hot and tight in his belly, hard and aching between his legs, hitching and breathless in his lungs and he craves Seungcheol. Needs him now.

They fall onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs, Seungcheol pinned beneath Jeonghan. After that, they come apart for a moment, Cheol's hands running up his arms as he looks at him. Beneath the lust darkening his gaze, there's a fondness Jeonghan still isn't used to seeing. It sends a different sort of warmth through his body, mixing with the molten knot in his abdomen in such a way he feels like might burst.

"You're so beautiful," Seungcheol whispers, hands tracing a solemn path down his abdomen. But his eyes never leave Jeonghan's and it's already so much more intimate than Jeonghan's ever had.

A shiver of fear ripples through his body in that moment and Seungcheol pulls him in for a slow kiss. It soothes his nerves, and he bunches his hands in the bedsheets as Cheol's hands slip up to his back, leaving sparks in their wake.

"We don't have to do this."

It's a gentle whisper against Jeonghan's mouth and he draws back to look at Seungcheol again. Reaches out to cup his cheek and he smiles when Seungcheol leans into his touch, brushing the softest of kisses along the heel of Jeonghan's hand. It settles in nicely next to the anxiety, reminding him that Seungcheol would never hurt him.

"I want to do this," he whispers. "I think it's a good thing that I'm a little scared. Means I'm doing the right thing, right?"

Seungcheol nods, dark hair scrunching up against the pillow. “I think so. But I mean it, Jeonghan. We won’t do anything you don’t want to do.”

He remembers back to a couple weeks ago, when they’d fought over this very thing because Jeonghan didn’t appreciate what he’d misconstrued as pity. When he’d been so terrified of the warmth in Seungcheol’s eyes, of the tenderness lingering beneath his touches, even back then, that he’d tried to shut down. But now… now it feels good. Right.

“I’ll tell you if I want to stop,” he murmurs, moving his hand a bit to brush his fingertips across Seungcheol’s plush, slightly chapped, definitely swollen lips. Cheol leaves light kisses against him as he goes. “Now lay back, okay? I want to take care of you. The way you take care of me.”

His face goes bright red at this but he settles against the pillows.

Jeonghan takes his time worshipping Seungcheol’s body, committing to memory every jump of his muscles, every hitch of breath in his throat. He memorizes the way Seungcheol’s skin feels beneath his hands, his lips, his tongue. He learns what makes him moan, what makes him gasp, what makes him beg for more. All of it only makes Jeonghan harder, only makes him want Seungcheol in him more, only makes it tougher to think. He marks Seungcheol the way Seungcheol marked him a few days ago; where no one else will see them, but they both will know they’re there. And there’s been a few times where Seungcheol tries to wrestle control back, with a few well-timed, breathless praises (“you’re doing so good, baby, making me feel so *good,”* when Jeonghan’s teasing his nipples, sucking, biting, licking; or “fuck - angel, right the - a-*ah,* you’re so good, Hannie, fuck,” when Jeonghan deepthroats his dick), but for the most part Jeonghan’s in control.

And he loves it.

There’s something about reducing Seungcheol to this: breathless, needy, delicate. There’s something about making Seungcheol lose himself in his pleasure, seeing this usually confident, put-together man begging for Jeonghan to keep touching him like this. It’s enough that Jeonghan can’t help himself; swallowing around Seungcheol’s dick he reaches down and takes his own cock in his hands. Just the simple act of stroking up the length once

is enough to send embers sparking through his body and he moans around Seungcheol's cock.

He did this in prison to that disgusting excuse for a human being slash prison guard, would give him blowjobs in exchange for keeping Hongjoong and his boys safe. It hadn't been Jeonghan's choice (though he knows it could've been so much worse) and that simple act of having his free will, his control stripped from him without consent had all but destroyed him. But this is different: he *wants* to do this, wants to pleasure Seungcheol like that. He sounds so good moaning, stuttering out "t-take it slow, angel, don't hurt your-s-self" as if Jeonghan hasn't been sucking dick since he was fifteen. But it's the thought that counts.

"Fuck," Seungcheol breathes as Jeonghan lifts off of him with an obscene *pop,* and he looks like a goddamn work of art. Black hair mussed and starting to stick to his forehead; skin marked up beneath a light sheen of sweat; eyes dark and lidded, cataloging every one of Jeonghan's movements.

"You're beautiful."

It leaves his lips before he can stop it, in a voice that sounds so utterly wrecked, but Seungcheol smiles. Smiles like they're in love and Jeonghan hadn't just deepthroated him. It leaves butterflies flitting around the coil of liquid heat in his belly and he moves up Seungcheol's body for a kiss.

"How do you want me to prep you, angel?" Cheol asks quietly when they pull apart, brushing Jeonghan's hair from his eyes.

Hands and knees are probably out of the question, since Seungcheol really shouldn't be moving his arms at all. So Jeonghan gets a bright idea, one that makes his whole body feel alight in white-hot desire just thinking about it. "You could watch me prep myself," he murmurs, trying not to grin when Seungcheol's eyes slowly go wide. "I've been told I put on quite a good show."

"Fuck," he hisses again. "I really wanna fuck you into the mattress, Jeonghan. Christ."

“Not until you’re feeling better, Cheollie.” He shifts off of Seungcheol with a smirk, getting up from the bed to grab the lube he’d discarded on the floor earlier, alongside his robe. When he comes back Seungcheol’s pouting a bit.

“I don’t like this,” he mumbles, sounding like a child. “I wanna touch you like that. But *no,* because I had to go and get myself shot.”

Jeonghan doesn’t say what he’s thinking; that if the gunshot had never happened they probably wouldn’t be here right now. Instead he uncaps the lube and squeezes some onto his fingers. “You’ll be healed before you know it, and then you can finger me and fuck me into the mattress all you want.”

“Don’t think I won’t,” he murmurs, but he sounds far away as he watches Jeonghan get on his hands and knees.

“How do you want me?” he asks quietly, meeting Cheol’s eyes. Fire scorches the air between them and even though he’s done this for a few partners before, it feels so different this time. Probably because he didn’t have this relationship with any of them, even Mingyu.

“Just like this,” Seungcheol whispers. “I want to see your face, angel.”

Jeonghan blushes at this but he does as he’s told, reaching behind himself with slick fingers. Honestly, it’s been awhile since he touched himself like this and with Seungcheol’s eyes on him, he feels so self-conscious. But in a good way. It only heightens the pleasure thrumming in his veins, coiling his muscles, since he knows Seungcheol’s watching his every move. Knows it’ll make him hot too.

He starts off with a few teasing touches, gently stroking against the tight ring of muscle, and it’s enough to make him moan. But it’s *not* enough to sate the desire pooled in his gut, begging to be filled. Fucked. So he inhales and pushes his finger inside on the exhale. And he doesn’t stop; spurred on by his own heat, the way he clenches around his own finger, he slides in knuckle deep.

And brushes his prostate.

A familiar, tingling shockwave of white heat bursts through his body and he moans, gripping the sheets with his free hand. Eyes shut, head ducked, he can feel Seungcheol's gaze on him.

"Already?" he asks, voice husky and taut.

"I've got long fingers," Jeonghan breathes, forgetting how good it felt to touch himself. It's great - sometimes *really* great - having someone else inside him but no one else knows his body the way he does. And he can't wait to show Seungcheol that. To put himself and his most vulnerable spots on display for Seungcheol to study, to watch, to learn.

"Keep going, angel," Cheol murmurs, and Jeonghan can feel his eyes on him still, burning through him in a way that sets him aflame. "You're doing so good."

Jeonghan goes slow at first, alternating between stroking his prostate or thrusting his finger. And eventually one turns into two turns into three and he's gasping with each press against that spot inside him, the one that makes him see stars. Somewhere nearby Seungcheol is praising him breathlessly as he strokes his own cock, judging by the slick sounds Jeonghan can barely make out over the static in his brain. God, he feels so full already, but it's not enough. So he pulls his fingers out with a broken "fuck me Seungcheol," and looks up to meet his gaze.

Cheol's teasing the tip of his own cock with his thumb, smearing the precome gathered there along the rest of his length, and he looks so good like this. "You're ready, baby?"

He nods, not trusting himself to speak at the moment.

"Then ride me," he murmurs.

Jeonghan doesn't have to be told twice; he reaches for the lube with trembling hands and slicks up Seungcheol's cock. He's so hot and heavy in his hands, so *thick,* and Jeonghan quickly positions himself with Cheol pressing against his entrance.

But before he can sink down on him, Seungcheol grips his hips tight, keeping him in place. “Look at me, Jeonghan,” he says softly, and it’s only then Jeonghan realizes he has his eyes closed.

So he opens them.

Seungcheol bites his lip, eyes dark and warm where they rest on Jeonghan. Already he looks at him with so much love it almost hurts. But Jeonghan doesn’t want to run away, he realizes. He doesn’t want to fight against his mind, push his emotions down where he can’t reach them. No, he wants Seungcheol to look at him like that. Wants him to hold him close and whisper sweet words that leave him just as breathless as his touch does. There’s so much in his heart right now, and he doesn’t know how to voice any of it. All he knows is he wants Seungcheol, needs him, more than he can handle.

When he speaks his voice is a high whine, brought about by their touches and the warmth spreading through his body. He *wants* him. “S-Seungcheol, I - “

“Shh. I know, baby. I know.”

Of course he does.

Stroking gentle shapes into the skin on Jeonghan’s hips with his thumbs, Seungcheol whispers, “Ride me, angel.”

Jeonghan sinks down onto his cock slowly, taking every inch of him until they’re pressed together, and it *burns.* In the best way. He can’t help the moan that rips from his throat as Seungcheol fills him up, as he stretches around him. It’s so good, so much, so *hot.* Everything feels hot - his and Seungcheol’s bodies, the air around them, the breaths between them. Sweat drips down Jeonghan’s temples as he stills, letting his body get used to Seungcheol so deep inside him. Fuck, like this the head of his cock rests against Jeonghan’s prostate and he’s not going to last long, he already knows.

“Ch-Cheol,” he breathes, eyes fluttering shut. “You feel so *good.”*

“I was gonna say the same about you, angel,” he whispers, gently squeezing his hips. “Keep going, Jeonghan. You’re so good. So, so good.”

Jeonghan reaches a hand back, bracing himself on one of Seungcheol's muscular thighs, as he slowly lifts his hips. He stops when only the tip of Seungcheol's cock is inside him - and then he sinks back down, taking all of him again in one single movement. The sound of skin on skin is loud and dirty and it steals the breath from his lungs, pleasure heavy and hot in his gut, tightening throughout his body.

"I'm not gonna last long," he whispers, opening his eyes to meet Seungcheol's gaze.

He looks just as fucked out as Jeonghan feels, gripping his hips in a vice grip that'll surely leave bruises. "Me either." And then he lets go of Jeonghan's hips, setting his hands on the mattress to prop himself up. He shifts inside Jeonghan, both of them moaning - there's hurt laced behind Cheol's - and then Seungcheol's sitting, clutching Jeonghan on his lap. They share a kiss, a mere brush of their mouths, cut short by Seungcheol's heavy, pained breaths.

"You okay?" Jeonghan whispers. "That must've hurt." He glances down and, sure enough, spots of red are beginning to form beneath the white bandage. With a sigh Jeonghan reaches out and traces his fingers along the edges of the gauze, concern rising with a lump in his throat. "Damn it, Cheol. You ripped your stitches."

"I'm fine," he murmurs around a soft pant. He takes Jeonghan's hand in his and brings it down from the bandage towards his heart. "I want you like this. So I can kiss you and hold you."

"You're a fucking softie," but he likes the way Seungcheol's heartbeat thrums under his palm. It matches his own wild pulse, thundering throughout his body.

Seungcheol thrusts like this, slow, deep rolls of his hips that leave the head of his cock brushing Jeonghan's prostate. It's sweet torture, threatening to take him apart piece by piece until there's nothing left of him but *Seungcheol*. So he just clings to him, Cheol's face buried in his neck, unable to move or speak with pleasure paralyzing him. It's never been like this before and he doesn't want it to stop. He wants to stay in this moment with Seungcheol, just the two of them here forever. No gang politics, no rivals, no

rats, no mistrust or betrayals. Just them and the way they feel about each other. Just Seungcheol and his tender touches, breathless moans tickling the hairs on the back of his neck. Just Jeonghan and the warmth consuming him, warmth that makes his heart swell and ache.

Soon Seungcheol's thrust turn sloppy and desperate and he takes Jeonghan's cock in his hand, trying to match the erratic pace his hips have set. It's electric and the ball of heat in Jeonghan's gut trembles, so close to snapping. He's so full, so hot and spent already, everything in his body tightening as he nears his orgasm. He feels himself twitching in Cheol's hand, ruts against his palm to chase what he so desperately craves.

"C-Come for me, Jeonghan."

It's a heated whisper against his throat as Cheol strokes over the head of his cock, and Jeonghan comes with a sharp cry, clinging so hard to Seungcheol he knows he'll leave nail marks. He spills between them, every muscle of his tensing in pleasure - and then he feels Seungcheol come, too. Deep inside him, warm and slick. Gripping Jeonghan's hips, sinking his teeth into his neck. But the pain is sweet, a reminder of how real this is, and they stay like that for a few moments. There's nothing but the heavy scent of sex in the air, their pants and gasps as the orgasms leave their systems - and Seungcheol. Hot, sweaty Seungcheol, holding him so close, trying to catch his breath buried in his neck. Trembling in his arms. Seungcheol, who he's pretty sure he's in love with, even though it makes no sense.

Yet, somehow it does.

"Seungcheol," he whispers, combing shaking fingers through his thick hair. "Seungcheol."

It's all he can say, all he *wants* to say, and eventually Cheol lifts his head. They share a slow, sweet kiss, Seungcheol's mouth so warm against his. "Jeonghan, I…"

He knows what Seungcheol wants to say; words they don't dare utter for so many reasons. But Jeonghan feels it too, he knows he does, so he kisses Seungcheol again. After that they come apart and Jeonghan walks on weak,

unsteady legs in search of towels. He cleans them both up, unable to stifle a gasp as the fluffy material rubs against his sensitive hole, along his cock. And then he collapses beside Seungcheol. Immediately he's drawn against his warm body, enveloped in heat once again. But it's a softer heat, one Jeonghan has now come to associate with only Seungcheol. One that leaves him thrumming in a different way and he buries his face in Cheol's good shoulder.

"You should get some sleep, angel," he whispers, fingertips tracing Jeonghan's spine. It sends shivers through his body and he presses closer. "We leave tomorrow, right?"

Jeonghan nods, hugging Cheol's waist, and he doesn't want to return home. He doesn't want to face their responsibilities. All he wants is this, for the foreseeable future. "I think," he murmurs, "when we get back to Seoul you and I should take some time off. There's a home on Yeongheungdo Island we can stay at for a while. You'll heal and I'll…" *I'll heal too.*

"That sounds perfect, Jeonghan. Why don't we talk to Shua about it tomorrow?"

He nods again, sleep weighing him down with each stroke of Seungcheol's hands on his skin. This'll be the third time he falls asleep in Cheol's arms and the thought makes him cuddle closer. He feels safe here, like this, and the last thing he remembers before passing out is Seungcheol humming quietly.

A couple hours later, Seungcheol's woken up by a soft *ding!* from his phone. He gropes blindly for it with one hand, the other still holding Jeonghan to him, and finds it laying uncharged on the bedside table. The offending wake-up call comes in the form of a text message from Joshua, a tersely worded "can we talk?" and Seungcheol has half a mind to just ignore him; it's past midnight and he's got a sleeping, snuggly Jeonghan currently crushing his internal organs. But he knows Joshua, and if he has something to talk about it's best not to keep him waiting. So Seungcheol slowly, gingerly untangles

himself from Jeonghan's soft warmth, offering a few apology kisses into his skin. And thankfully he doesn't wake up.

Body aching for a lot of different reasons, he dresses and then pockets his room key. After one last look at Jeonghan, sleeping so peacefully his heart hurts, he heads next door. He doesn't know what he and Jeonghan are now but he's excited to find out. Especially at a beach house on Yeongheungdo. Fuck, a few weeks alone with Jeonghan is going to be incredible. No NIS, no Jaesung or Byungchul breathing down his neck. Maybe he'll finally be able to figure out what he's gonna do about all this. Because there's no way now he could ever physically hurt Jeonghan, let alone continue to deceive him.

Honestly?

He's not sure he ever would've been able to. Not truly.

With a light sigh he knocks on Joshua's door. It opens rather quickly, revealing Joshua still in his suit from earlier. But it's disheveled; the tie rests loose around his neck, the jacket discarded somewhere Seungcheol can't see, a few buttons undone. Strands of his hair fall into hard eyes, like they've endured one too many hands running through them, and Seungcheol's never seen Joshua Hong so… perturbed. Worried. Not even on those nights when he'd stay over and Jeonghan would have nightmares at two a.m. No, this is different and anxiety settles itself like a fifty-kilogram weight in the pit of Seungcheol's stomach.

"Come in," Joshua mutters without a glance at him.

Cheol does, watching as he settles himself in a chair not too far away. He crosses his legs, fixing Seungcheol with those sharp eyes, and not for the first time he worries Joshua can see through everything. "Uh," he tries around a closing throat, feeling awkward as shit standing there in his rumpled sweats and messy hair, knowing he smells like sex and Jeonghan. "Everything okay?"

"What's your endgame, Seungcheol?" he asks point blank, voice even and completely out of place with his tousled appearance.

It's too late for this shit and it takes his sleep-addled brain longer than it should to process what's being said to him. "What are you - what?"

"With Jeonghan." He's short, sounding like a parent scolding a child, and it's a tone Seungcheol's only ever heard him use with the younger members. He doesn't like it and really wishes he would've just stayed wrapped in Jeonghan's warmth. "What do you plan to do with him now that you're…?"

"Oh." Good fucking question. It's something he definitely hasn't had the time to decide for himself, and he figures he could lie right now. Tell Joshua some bullshit answer about sticking around, and maybe it wouldn't be a lie. Maybe… maybe he *could* stay here. Find a way out of the NIS, find a way to get rid of Jaesung, and spend the rest of his days with Jeonghan.

But is that something he'd actually want, being a gang member's partner? Like his mother? Like Jeonghan's?

"Well?" Joshua asks.

"Um." He wracks his brain for words. "I don't - we just barely slept together, Shua. I didn't know I was supposed to have our future figured out so quickly."

Sighing heavily Joshua stands up and takes slow, calculated steps across the room until they're standing a few inches apart. And even though he's got a few centimeters on Joshua, Seungcheol can't help but feel tiny like this. Can't help wanting to cower against the look in his eyes. Joshua's never made him feel scared before and he's not sure what to do with this. How to approach this. Because something tells him he's going about it completely the wrong way.

"Jeonghan is my best friend," Shua says quietly. "Has been for almost our entire lives. I've seen him go through some awful shit, shit that I tried my best to protect him from. And…"

There's a catch in his throat and Cheol watches him swallow against it.

And then it's gone as quickly as it came.

“It’s my job to do that,” he continues in that same soft, detached tone of voice. It sends chills down Seungcheol’s back. “So I’ve been watching you, Seungcheol. Digging into you with Wonwoo, making sure you won’t hurt Jeonghan like I thought you might.” A smile touches his lips then, but it’s completely devoid of anything happy or humorous. It’s *scary.* And the fact that he’d been - been working with Wonwoo to…

Shit.

Seungcheol’s heart starts pounding.

“I didn’t know the NIS had such skilled people working for them,” Joshua goes on, sounding underwater above the rushing, the thundering in Seungcheol’s ears. “They definitely worked hard to make that backstory of yours airtight, but no one’s better at that shit than Wonwoo. And you’re not as good at hiding it as you think you are, Seungcheol.”

No.

“I don’t,” he tries, sounding like a broken whisper, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?”

Joshua looks at him evenly, not a shred of warmth or affection in his sharp eyes. He’s all cold calculation and Seungcheol knows he fucked up. There’s no going back now. Joshua *knows* and he’ll tell Jeonghan, he’ll tell the others and… and that’s it. If Seungcheol doesn’t die at their hands Byungchul will have his head for ruining this op, goddamn it he’s *fucked,* fuck fuck fuck -

“I know what you are, Agent Choi. Who you are.”

There it is.

And with that, Seungcheol’s world falls apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

so that's fun.... just when things were getting happy.... whose fault is that.... definitely not mine....

thank you guys so much for reading! <3

Chapter 16

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm averaging like 6k per chapter with this fic... that's wild. thank you guys for reading such long chapters lmao

tw: nothing that i can think of, just angst oof

sixteen: liar

“I know what you are, Agent Choi. Who you are.”

Seungcheol can’t breathe, can’t speak, can’t move; he just stands dumbfounded before Joshua, the man he never thought would hold his whole life in his hands like this. The man he never thought he’d have to worry about but look at him now, smarter than Seungcheol had ever given him credit for.

Just like Jeonghan.

He tries to open his mouth and say something, *anything,* but all that comes out is a choked noise that sounds too much like a sob and he can’t *do* this. Can’t stay here and watch Joshua take his whole life apart. Can’t stay here knowing that it’ll only be a matter of time before he tells Jeonghan. And then what will he do? Return to the NIS, to Byungchul, laid low after failing his first undercover op? Stay here and wait for Jeonghan to…

To what?

Kill him? Could he do that? Or would he make one of the others do it? Would Jeonghan be able to *live* with that?

Of course he could. He’d given himself to Seungcheol after so much hurt, so much effort, only for Cheol to - to betray him in the end. Only for Cheol to have been betraying him this whole time.

Fuck, he wants to run away. Run away and never come back.

“Are you going to tell him?” he whispers through strained vocal cords, gritted teeth. There’s no point denying it and he can’t believe it’s come to this. Months of hiding, of trying his best to fare in this strange territory all but alone, all for it to come crashing down right now. His eyes are fixed on his own bare feet because he can’t bring himself to look at Joshua. He’s not prepared for what he knows he’ll see there.

And Joshua doesn’t speak, not at first. In his silence, the only things Seungcheol can hear are the pounding of his own heart, his own shallow breathing echoing in his ears. Everything in him itches, aches to run. To hide. And he knows that’s the coward’s way; if he was truly brave, truly the man everyone thinks he is, the man he wants to be, he’d wake Jeonghan and tell him everything from his own mouth and accept the consequences.

But, in tragic irony, Seungcheol can’t handle knowing he’s hurt him.

What a piece of shit he is.

“What are your mission parameters?” Joshua asks instead of directly answering him and his words make Seungcheol’s heart sink further.

He wracks his brain for that information, like a clunky old computer sifting through years of old data for one tiny document. Nothing about this feels real and a part of him, small and naive, thinks that it’s just a dream. A very specific stress dream brought about by, well, this exact situation: confronting his job and his mission alongside his feelings for Jeonghan. For all of them. But he’s not that lucky. “Uh,” he says, “I’m - I was supposed to pose as Sanghoon’s - and then Jeonghan’s - bodyguard and collect information on them, the other members, all the criminal activity going on, and report it back.”

“For how long?”

“However long the NIS needed me here.”

“I see.” He’s quiet again. “Does Jaesung know?”

"And Yooseok's buddy could take over the way he's been wanting…"

"That the whole reason they're keeping that contact alive is for the shit he can give them on Yoon."

It's been four days or so since that confrontation, since Seungcheol took a bullet for Jeonghan, and he still hasn't been able to make sense of Yooseok's man's words. Obviously he was talking about Jaesung, but was he really? Fuck, is Seungcheol being played by Jaesung too? Set up for betrayal by one of two - now three - people who know the truth about him? Is he actually collateral damage in this war he's been told he's on the front lines of? Kept around for when they need a scapegoat, bullet fodder?

How ironic.

Seungcheol could end it all right here: tell Joshua the truth as far as he knows. That Jaesung's been an informant with the NIS for half a decade. That his goal all along has been for Sanghoon and Jeonghan to die, whether or not he wants the figurative throne for himself. That he's the reason why they've waited to go after Yooseok, why Yooseok was down in Miryang to begin with. Fuck, Cheol could definitely end it all here and find at least partial redemption in his confession. He'd save Jeonghan's life in doing so, even if the betrayal would cost him his own.

Is that something he's ready for?

"Yes," he whispers to Joshua, "because he's the one that put me here."

Silence fills the air between them for a few moments, Joshua's eyes locked onto Seungcheol's. And then he sighs. "That's what I thought."

Out of all the ways he could've reacted, out of everything he could've said, Seungcheol did not expect that. "You - what?"

Joshua sighs once more and motions to the desk in the corner of the room. "Why don't we sit? We obviously have a lot to discuss."

So Seungcheol sits, a bit confused as to why he doesn't have a bullet buried in his head currently (and the gunshot wound in his collarbones starts to ache again). He watches Joshua sit down too, a solemn look on his face. The way they're facing each other feels like there should be coffee or something between them. Like casual coworkers discussing a project. But the air, the energy around them calls for something stronger, even though any ounce of alcohol would work against his already muddled brain.

How he wishes he would've just stayed curled up next to Jeonghan.

Jeonghan.

A ghost of panic edges along his mind. What if Jeonghan comes looking for him? What if he's awake and can hear them? What if -

"Breathe, Seungcheol," Joshua says evenly, clinically, drumming his fingertips on the wooden tabletop. "We're just talking."

"Are we?" he gets out.

Joshua nods. "We are." He sighs then, a heavy inhale and exhale, and stops tapping. "I won't say I suspected you from the start, because I didn't necessarily. It was just more of me wondering how it worked, you leaving the NIS for gang life. Because we all knew a lot about you by the time you first showed up. Partially through stories Jaesung, Jaehwan, and even Sanghoon had spread over the years, partially through a report Wonwoo compiled that told us all we needed to know in terms of your past."

That explains why Jeonghan seemed to know so much about him when they first met. And it only adds to his anxiety because *what the hell was in that report?*

"And I guess," Joshua continues, "I was curious how someone like you would end up here. But I never truly thought you were undercover because I knew Jaesung wasn't that stupid. So that left me with two trains of thought: either you had indeed left the NIS for good or you were undercover and Jaesung, for whatever reason, was helping you." A sardonic sort of grin

crosses his lips and Seungcheol sighs at the exhaustion he sees in it. "You can imagine why I didn't much like exploring that second option."

"I don't know why he's an informant," Seungcheol says softly. "And it's not because of me. I guess he's been working with the NIS for about five years now. And-and the reason I'm here is because he wanted me here. I'm assuming this whole undercover op has been in the works for years now and it would've made so much more sense for the NIS to send someone more seasoned but instead… Jaesung wanted me. I guess because we're related?"

Joshua's smile sharpens into something harder, a bit mocking, and then it disappears. "You're *definitely* not good at this, are you?"

The insult leaves a sour taste in his mouth and he shifts in his seat. But it's true; Joshua's right. "No," he murmurs. "I'm not."

"Jaesung wanted you for that reason: you weren't prepared and I'm assuming he figured you'd break and reveal yourself too early. Which would've turned everything on its head and given him the in to get what he wants, what he's wanted all along apparently: to lead."

It makes sense, yet it doesn't. It fits with the image of his uncle Seungcheol's held all these years, an image chipped away at over the last several months until now, Seungcheol has no real idea who Jaesung is.

Or does he?

"I'm dead, aren't I?" he asks quietly, not sure why Joshua would have an answer. But it's been nagging at him subconsciously in his waking hours and he just isn't sure what to make of it, really. What to make of Jaesung now. He blames the concentration of pain meds over the last several days. "I mean, that's what Yooseok's men said. That the only reason I'm still around is for the information I can give Jaesung. And I - I can't do that anymore. Not with Jeonghan and I..." He sighs and looks away, towards the wall opposite them. The wall with a sleeping Jeonghan on the other side of it. Jeonghan, who he's falling in love with despite everything working against them. In admitting that, he signs his own death sentence.

Joshua's quiet for a moment. And when he speaks again his voice is a whisper, like he's afraid of being heard. "I won't let that happen, Seungcheol."

Joshua's speaking Korean yet his words fall on Seungcheol's ears like a foreign language. He turns back towards him and frowns. "What?"

"Look." He pushes a hand through his hair, tugs at the collar of his suit. "You're part of us now, for better or for worse. And maybe I shouldn't, but I trust you when you say you're loyal now because I know you. I've been watching you, analyzing you for months; I've had Wonwoo exhaust every possible resource on you because I had to know for sure you wouldn't hurt Jeonghan."

"I am though," he whispers, realizing just how badly he's fucked up. Realizing there's only a few ways it can end, because it *will* end, he's sure of it. And for that, he hates himself. "No matter what, I will hurt him."

Joshua's eyes are sharp and dissecting, yet there's a warmth there. "Jeonghan's stronger than you think, stronger than he thinks. And I believe to be truly happy he needs to realize that he can survive being hurt and not in a physical sense. He's closed himself off for too long and… you'll be good for him. Even when it ends badly."

When. Not if.

Seungcheol looks away again, towards that wall, and he wonders if Jeonghan's still asleep. If he misses him. If Joshua's right, and Jeonghan will be able to endure their inevitable end. Will he come out stronger for it, the way Joshua thinks, or will it break him more? The thought steals the breath from Cheol's lungs in a rough sob and he's only now aware of the tears climbing his throat, blinding his eyes. No matter what happens, it will be Seungcheol's fault. If Jeonghan ends up happy, it's because of Seungcheol. If Jeonghan ends up more damaged than he is now, if he can't bring himself to open up again for fear of heartbreak, it's because of Seungcheol and he can't believe he's been so *selfish.*

He claims to love Jeonghan, yet if he really did…

“I have to tell him,” he bites out, wiping at his eyes and cheeks, trying to calm the desperation clinging to his soul. “I can’t - I can’t keep lying to him. He doesn’t deserve it. No matter what happens to me because of it, I - he *has* to know.”

“Seungcheol, look at me.”

His voice sounds the way a hospital feels: too quiet, even when it’s chaos; efficient, cold and impersonal. And when Seungcheol lifts his head to meet his gaze, he finds no warmth there this time. Joshua is detached and scarier than Cheol’s ever seen him. He doesn’t want to hear what he has to say, suddenly, because he knows he won’t like it.

“You can’t tell him anything, for a number of reasons,” Joshua murmurs. “If you tell Jeonghan, his temper will get the best of him and everyone else will know. Including Jaesung. And I don’t know what Jaesung will do. Especially if he’s using you to get what he wants. And if you tell Jeonghan now… he’s more apt to do something he wouldn’t if there was a more solid foundation beneath you two.”

“Like what?” Seungcheol whispers, knowing exactly what Joshua means.

“Like kill you. Whether it’s at his own hand or someone else’s.”

Cheol doesn’t want to admit it, but Joshua is right. Because as much as Jeonghan doesn’t like violence or killing, he’s still a gang leader. He was still raised in this life, raised by his father. He’s still one of the best assassins they have, even if he’s all but worthless in hand to hand combat. And Seungcheol knows what telling Jeonghan would bring him, what would be in store for him. No matter what he faces expulsion from the NIS, or torture, or… or death. No matter what he chooses to do he’s trapped, and somehow it’s come to this.

“I know it sounds harsh and like I - like I don’t care about him,” Joshua murmurs, “but I *do*. He’s my best friend, my brother, and I…

“You’re doing what you think is right,” Cheol says quietly, numbness spreading through his body. His brain’s reached its limit, he thinks. So with

a sigh he sits back in the chair and just stares at the glossy, too-perfect wood that is this hotel table-top. If he spends too much time with his thoughts he'll work himself into a panic attack. Fuck, right now he just needs to sleep. That'll help.

"I'm trying," Joshua says. "And I know Jeonghan can survive this. I know eventually he'll be able to move past… you. Besides," and some warmth slips back into his voice. He sounds wistful, but sad. "He's been happy the last few days. I mean, of course there's a lot of shit going on but… he's smiled more this week than I've seen him smile in a long time. And maybe it's selfish of me - no, it definitely is - but I just want to see him that way for a little while longer."

Seungcheol just sits quietly, trying not to let Joshua's words process in his mind. He can't handle any more tonight, just wants to burrow in Jeonghan's warmth and pretend like everything's okay.

Joshua sighs, no doubt realizing they're not getting any farther than this tonight. "We'll talk later," he says quietly. "Rest, Seungcheol. We're leaving tomorrow. Or, technically today."

He nods numbly and stands up on legs that don't feel attached to his body. And on them he walks back to Jeonghan. Their room is a little on the warm side, the sharp scent of sex still clinging to the air, and even though it was maybe three hours ago it feels like a lifetime has passed since Seungcheol held him. So he undresses and climbs back into bed. Molds himself against Jeonghan's warm body and breathes him in for a long moment.

Jeonghan stirs, mumbling something sleepy into Seungcheol's shoulder. And then he looks up at him. He's blinking eyes, pouty lips, and everything Seungcheol could ever want. So he presses a soft kiss to those pouty lips, and then his cute nose, pretending his heart doesn't ache when Jeonghan smiles.

"What time is it?" he murmurs.

"Still late." He holds Jeonghan so close. "Go back to sleep, angel."

“You’re cold,” and his voice, rough with sleep, is only slightly accusing.

Cheol kisses his forehead, wishes he could kiss away all his hurt, all his pain. “I couldn’t sleep so I went for a bit of a walk. I’m sorry, baby.”

It’s a lie, one that shouldn’t hurt as much as it does.

Jeonghan burrows into him, lips ghosting the bandage. “Stay.”

“I will,” Seungcheol whispers.

Another lie.

He holds Jeonghan tighter.

When they wake up closer to noon than any of them would like there’s no time to dwell on last night. He and Jeonghan bustle around their rooms repacking, ignoring a smug Joshua and his “this is why I packed last night, before the wedding”. And then it’s goodbyes to Daewon and Bang Chan (who’s settling in rather nicely; he even hugs Jeonghan, who freezes for a moment and then wraps his arms around the kid) before they head to the airport. Only then is there a moment to breathe and Seungcheol spends it with his hand in Jeonghan’s, thumb stroking across his skin with a smile on his face.

To his credit, Joshua isn’t acting out of the ordinary and Seungcheol would think their conversation was definitely a stress dream if not for the few quick looks Joshua’s been sending him throughout the last few hours. But for the most part Seungcheol tries to ignore said looks. He doesn’t know what awaits them in Seoul (no doubt an irate Boo Seungkwan ready to rip off his bandage and fix his stitches while he mutters about Seungcheol being an idiot because, according to war stories he’s heard, that’s what Seungkwan does with *everyone),* and he hopes not much happened in a week. He hopes things stayed somewhat normal at home because Seungcheol can’t handle much else.

And while they wait for their flight at the gate, Jeonghan brings up taking time off, with a squeeze to Seungcheol's hand. He says something about healing and the smile Joshua gives them is genuine. Warm. "You deserve it," he says.

So on the plane, hurtling thirty thousand feet above Korea, Seungcheol asks Jeonghan if they're dating. It's hardly the best place to ask but Cheol needs to know before he kisses Jeonghan in front of the entire gang.

"No," Jeonghan says as casually as ever, yet there's something else in his voice, but Seungcheol can't figure it out as he focuses on his words - that *single* word, actually.

"No?" He tries not to overthink this, that maybe he's a lot further in this than Jeonghan is -

"How can we be dating if you've never taken me on a date?"

Casual indifference gives way to playful teasing and Cheol sucks in a breath, fixing a giggly Jeonghan with a sharp look he knows is already faltering. And then they're kissing, but who pulled who in Seungcheol has no idea. He just melts against Jeonghan's lips, a soft warmth filling his chest. When they break the kiss he leans his forehead against Jeonghan's, smiling as their hands intertwine. He loves how delicate Jeonghan's long, thin fingers feel in his, how soft his skin is even though it shouldn't be.

"You mean shootouts with rival gangs aren't dates?"

Jeonghan smiles, showing off that little chip on his tooth. The one Seungcheol adores with all his heart. "Not quite. I was thinking more dinner, maybe some dancing. And then murder."

"Oh I see. There has to be a romantic prelude to the killing, is that it?"

He nods and presses another kiss to Seungcheol's lips. "But I want to date you," he murmurs. "Be your boyfriend or - or whatever."

So when they land, greeted by a beaming Seokmin and a tired but smiling Minghao, Jeonghan is definitely his boyfriend. He grips his hand tightly, Jeonghan handling both of their bags on his other side, and Minghao's sharp eyes immediately find their point of contact. Seokmin's too busy with Shua's tongue in his mouth to notice, but Minghao definitely does. And his smile widens.

Seungcheol feels accepted in that moment. Like he could stay here if he wanted. Be a part of this for good. And that only weighs his heart down; he masks it with a kiss to the back of Jeonghan's hand.

"This is new," Minghao says as he reaches for their bags to put them in the trunk of Seokmin's car. "Had fun in Daegu, you two?"

Jeonghan blushes, squeezes Cheol's hand. "Hardly."

Seokmin doesn't notice until they're halfway home and Minghao makes some offhanded comment; Seokmin shrieks in response and almost crashes the fucking car. And then: "Soonyoung owes me fifty thousand won!"

The others react pretty much in the same vein when they arrive at Jeonghan's apartment. Seokmin bursts through the door first with a loud "Jeonghan-hyung and Seungcheol-hyung are dating!" and then chaos ensues. They're both wrapped in hugs from everyone else ("not too hard, Cheol's injured you heathens!"), subjected to congratulations and "I knew it"s and then Chan's squeezing Seungcheol so tight. It puts pressure on his collarbones, makes his wound ache, but he allows it because he missed Chan and his brightness.

"Does this mean you're my actual hyung now?" he asks.

He's rewarded with a forehead flick from Jeonghan who tries and fails to look scolding ("Yah, we're dating not *married.")*. But Chan grins nonetheless, pulling his brother into a hug as well.

After that someone flips an invisible switch and it's time for business.

Chan argues that he should be allowed to stay because “I’m twenty-two, I’m not stupid; I know you guys get into some shit” and Jeonghan agrees. Really, Seungcheol knows he missed his dongsaeng a lot. Just like he missed all of them. And Cheol can tell, through the fondness in his eyes, the way he’d stroked their hair or buried his face in them during the period of hugs. He’s truly their hyung and if anyone loves these men most in the world, it’s Jeonghan.

They sit the way they would around the table at headquarters, Seungcheol and Joshua on Jeonghan’s sides - the only difference is Chan nuzzling into Wonwoo’s shoulder, despite Wonwoo’s icy indifference towards him as he focuses on Jeonghan. And even that is to be expected. It leaves Seungcheol feeling calmer, knowing that not much, if anything, has changed since they’ve been gone.

“So Daegu was a lot more eventful than we were expecting?” Jihoon asks.

Jeonghan nods. “Definitely. Our new additions are settling in - “

“They’re my age, aren’t they?” Chan asks from his perch on Wonwoo’s shoulder.

He’s fixed with eleven pairs of narrowed eyes (Cheol just merely tries to hide a grin), the sharpest of these from Jeonghan. “Yes. Slightly younger. But don’t get any ideas. I already don’t like you hanging around with those two.” He motions to Seungkwan and Vernon; the former looks as offended as he can get while the latter just shrugs with a mellow grin. But Jeonghan pays them no mind as he continues scolding his brother. “How’d you hear about that anyway?”

The tips of Wonwoo’s ears turn bright red and he clears his throat. “He was around when I was working on my research on them. So I… I might’ve talked about them a bit.”

Jeonghan sighs. “Fine. And yes, they’re young as you all know. It’s awful what happened to their hyungs but we’re that much stronger against Yooseok.”

Everyone nods quietly, no doubt processing Jeonghan's words, and then almost in tandem every eye in the room lands on Seungcheol. Definitely less scolding than with poor Chan a few moments ago but still worrying nonetheless. He gulps under their scrutiny, clears his throat. Glances between each gaze until he reaches Jeonghan and by then his face is hot and he *knows* he's blushing.

"Does it still hurt?" Vernon asks finally and beside him Seungkwan smacks him.

"It's a gunshot wound, genius!" he cries. "Of course it still hurts!"

Actually because of all the attention it starts to ache a bit and he rubs at it subconsciously. "I'll need you to look at the stitches, Kwannie, if you don't mind. I might've…" He glances at Jeonghan who bites his lip and blushes, his cheeks turning the softest shade of pink. "... ripped them."

Seungkwan fakes a gag, Jihoon and Chan make the same face of thinly veiled disgust, Soonyoung and Seokmin both giggle. Everyone else mostly just grins to himself, even Jeonghan, and Seungcheol gives his thigh a gentle squeeze.

He definitely likes this boyfriend arrangement.

"Okay so anyway," Seungkwan sighs. "I can definitely take a look at them. Maybe Channie can help me?"

Chan lets out a "of course, hyung!" in the same moment Jeonghan shakes his head with a "hell no". And then their eyes meet and Jeonghan sighs heavily.

"Let me do it, hyung," Chan says quietly, setting his jaw firm. He looks grown up like this, like he could indeed be a part of the gang along with the hyungs he's known all his life. "I'm further along in my degree than Kwan-hyung was when he dropped out. I can do it."

Jeonghan opens his mouth to say something and then closes it.

Chan holds his gaze with more confidence than Cheol's seen from him in the several months they've known each other. And he's not sure what happened

here the week they were gone but Chan's a lot more self-assured than he used to be.

Out of the corner of his eye, Seungcheol sees Wonwoo's hand skim down Chan's back. He traces brief shapes along his spine, long fingers moving deftly, but it's definitely intimate. Something clicks in Seungcheol's brain but he doesn't get much time to ponder it; he's distracted by Jeonghan's heavy sigh.

"Fine," he says quietly. "But only because I don't want to bother our contact at the hospital with this."

Seungcheol leans against Jeonghan and smiles. "Am I not worth the hassle, angel?"

He blushes a bit deeper and yeah, Seungcheol *really* likes this boyfriend stuff. "Uh, well, what I meant was - "

Sighs go up around the room and Cheol grins at the defeated look on Jeonghan's face. With that, they continue on with business until everyone in the room is caught up. And then Jeonghan leans back into the couch with another sigh.

"Tomorrow Cheol and I are… are heading to Yeongheungdo for a while," he says, eyes already starting to droop. God the coastal air is going to do him some good. Being away from all this for as long as they can, spending all their time exploring each other in every sense of the phrase. It's going to be incredible. "Joshua will be in charge during that time." He sits up a bit straighter and looks at Wonwoo. "Would it be too much of a hassle to ask you to stay here a bit more permanently, Won?"

Next to him Chan bites his lip.

Seungcheol hides a smirk.

Wonwoo shakes his head. "Of course not, hyung. I'll just have to bring more stuff over, but it's hardly a problem."

Jeonghan nods and thanks him quietly. And after that dinner is ordered and the thirteen of them fill Jeonghan's apartment with loud laughter as they eat. Seungcheol sits on the floor with his back against the couch, Jeonghan's legs draped over him, and sometimes in between bites he reaches over and just slips a hand beneath the hem of Jeonghan's fitted pants, strokes his thumb along the soft skin beneath his ankle. He feels like he can't get enough of him; like if he stops touching him Jeonghan might cease to exist. And for most of their dinner Jeonghan eats with one hand; the other rests in Seungcheol's hair. Sometimes he curls his fingers through his locks and other times he just keeps it there. A constant reminder that he's here, he's not going anywhere.

Seungcheol loves it.

After dinner, Cheol, Seungkwan, and Chan spend a few minutes in the hall bathroom fixing Seungcheol's stitches. Seungkwan talks the entire time about random shit. Mostly stories from his abandoned degree and Chan cuts in where he can with stories of his own. Cheol just sits quietly, trying not to wince or ask Kwan if maybe Chan can take a crack at it; and as he sits, he realizes that he missed everyone. That these men are his only friends now. And that doesn't do much to quell the anxious guilt taking up his heart. He tries to swallow it back and offers Seungkwan and Chan what he hopes is a warm smile when they ask what's wrong.

And then when they head back for the living room, Joshua stands up alongside Wonwoo and says that they're going to head back to Wonwoo's place to grab more of his things for tomorrow. He sends Seungcheol a rather pointed look that Cheol hopes is more subtle to the others, but he gets the message clearly: he's to go with them. To talk, he assumes. So with a labored sigh that he wishes was fake he hoists himself up and then leans down, as much as his collarbones ache, to kiss Jeonghan's forehead.

"We'll be back soon," he says quietly.

Jeonghan nods, blinking a bit sleepily. He looks so precious, like he might fall asleep right here, and Cheol doesn't want to leave him. But he does,

falling into step beside Joshua and Wonwoo as they leave the apartment. None of them speaks until they're down in Shua's car, buckling up. Only then does Joshua sigh heavily and look at Seungcheol from the driver's seat. Wonwoo's in the backseat and Cheol glances at him to see him typing something on his phone.

"So Wonwoo knows," Seungcheol says quietly.

Out of his peripheral, he sees Wonwoo nod. "If you want you can take a look at the report I compiled on you, that way you're aware of all I know."

Before Cheol can respond though, Joshua cuts in. "Seungcheol was able to confirm our fears, Won," he says as he starts the car, head whipping around as he backs out. "Jaesung is working against us."

Wonwoo sighs heavily and types something else into his phone. "I assume he wants to take over?"

"I guess so," Cheol says. "I don't think he wants to kill any of you guys but definitely Jeonghan. Maybe - maybe me."

"We're gonna need to gather as much information as we can on him," Wonwoo says quietly. He sounds focused, all business, no doubt absorbed in his phone, "if we want everyone to truly believe us. We can say what we want and the others might put some stock in it but without any concrete evidence it's a fool's errand. That being said, it's gonna take a while to gather said information."

Joshua nods and glances at Seungcheol as he maneuvers his car onto the streets, from the parking garage. "That means you'll need to keep up the facade for a while longer, Seungcheol."

"You mean lie to Jeonghan and everyone else," he bites out rather petulantly, but he's *tired.* Especially now that Joshua and Wonwoo know *and* they're on his side. He doesn't want to keep deceiving Jeonghan, not after what they shared last night. But he knows he doesn't have the choice.

“Yes,” Joshua sighs. “That way, when we’re ready to reveal everything they might not be so mad at you because some more time has passed, if that makes sense?”

“They’ll have spent more time with you, trusting you,” Wonwoo clarifies, sounding far away.

Cheol gets it, but that doesn’t mean he likes it. “All right.”

“Besides,” Joshua says, glancing at him briefly, “the fact that you worked with us to take down the real threat should prove your loyalty. So don’t stress, Seungcheol. It’s gonna be okay.”

Seungcheol can’t help not believing him. Something in him nags at the back of his mind, deep in his stomach, telling him to prepare for the worst. That this might not turn out the way they want. “Will you guys searching for shit alert Jaesung to what we’re doing?”

From the backseat Wonwoo snorts. “Hardly. I’m good at what I do, hyung.”

“I mean, you had no idea he was digging into you,” Joshua says.

Seungcheol makes a face and looks out the window. It’s just past sunset, and the sky is that beautiful pinkish navy blue it gets at this time; he can make out a couple stars above Seoul’s garish nightlife and he can’t wait to see more tomorrow night. With Jeonghan, on Yeongheungdo. Just the thought sparks Seungcheol’s anxiety and he sighs heavily. Apparently he needs to spend the next however long being as real and sincere with Jeonghan as he can be and hope for the best. Hope that when everything comes out, Jeonghan remembers those moments. Hope that he remembers the way Seungcheol held him, kissed him, whispered to him.

Hope that either they can salvage what they have or Jeonghan isn’t as destroyed as Seungcheol thinks he will be.

He tries his best to help Wonwoo and Shua pack but he's relegated to the couch because "Seungkwan will pitch a fit if he has to redo your stitches again" so he just watches and talks about Jaesung. He tells them everything: how he insisted on Seungcheol going undercover, how he's been asking Cheol to block attempts to go after Yooseok so that he can help Yooseok build up his forces to easily obliterate Jeonghan. How he contacted Kyuwon anonymously and had him poison Sanghoon. How he's accused Cheol of lying to him already because of less than desirable reports.

"Feed him false info," Joshua says as he zips up Wonwoo's duffle bag. "We can't have him suspect anything."

"I know," Seungcheol sighs. "It's just… he's… God, this is gonna sound dumb but he's scary, Joshua. And I can't predict him and what he'll do. What if he says something to Jeonghan about me? What if he - "

"What ifs will drive you crazy, Cheol," Joshua says quietly. And with a deep inhale he comes over to sit down next to Seungcheol. Even after everything, even after Joshua finding out the truth about him, he's still his friend and Cheol needs that.

So he takes a chance and leans his head against Joshua's shoulder; he responds by squeezing Cheol's knee.

"It's going to be okay," he murmurs. "I know it's in your nature to worry but you don't have to, I promise. Let Wonwoo and I handle all of that so you can enjoy your time with Jeonghan, okay?"

Seungcheol nods, wishing that were easier said than done.

When they return home everyone has cleared out; Chan's curled up on the couch with his Switch and Wonwoo greets him with a soft kiss. On the ride back home he'd said something about dating Chan now but not to tell Jeonghan or anyone else because he doesn't have a death wish. So Seungcheol and Joshua avert their eyes as the two newly minted boyfriends murmur to each other. Actually, Joshua just wishes Seungcheol good night

and heads out. So Seungcheol moves towards the hall but he's stopped by a quiet "hyung?"

He turns and Chan's watching him with warm eyes, a long thin arm wound around his waist. "I'm glad you're okay. And that you're with hyungie now. Have fun on Yeongheungdo, okay?"

Seungcheol smiles and walks over to ruffle his hair; Chan returns his smile. "Be safe, kiddo. And don't boss Wonwoo around too much." With that he makes his way down the hallway, laughing to himself at Wonwoo's surprised spluttering, Chan's victorious "ha!". And then he finds himself in front of Jeonghan's door. He's not sure if he's supposed to sleep here tonight, they haven't talked about that yet, but he wants Jeonghan. Craves him - the warmth of his skin, the way he feels in Seungcheol's arms.

So he opens the door.

Jeonghan's sitting on his bed, typing something into his phone, and as soon as he looks up at Seungcheol his cute little focused face breaks into a wide smile. It immediately quells any doubt Seungcheol feels about their relationship and after closing the door he crosses the room to kiss Jeonghan. His boyfriend.

"I packed for our trip while you were gone," Jeonghan murmurs against his lips. "How long do you think we should stay?"

"As long as we can," he says, tilting his head back for another kiss. He can't get enough of Jeonghan, can't wait to have him all to himself. "A few weeks, at least. Especially since I can't really do any strenuous activities or whatever with my wound."

Something bright and wicked shines in Jeonghan's eyes when they pull away and it's a look Cheol knows well by now. "That's a shame. Because all I wanted us to do on Yeongheungdo were strenuous activities."

"Oh? Like what?" Seungcheol sits on the bed so he can reach Jeonghan's neck; he trails soft kisses along the curve of it, from behind his ear down to

his shoulder. He doesn't miss the way Jeonghan's breath stutters in his throat.

"Hi-hiking, swimming, running on the beach," he whispers breathlessly. "Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Pining you to the mattress and having my way with you," he breathes as his lips ghost the bite mark he left on Jeonghan's neck last night, when he came. He runs the tip of his tongue over it, dragging a moan from Jeonghan's throat, and triumph settles like a ball of familiar heat in the pit of his stomach.

"That sounds like - *ah!"*

The teasing quip he no doubt was going to make dies on his tongue as Seungcheol sneaks a hand down to cup his half-hard erection through his sweats, and Jeonghan breathes his name.

"Lay back," Seungcheol whispers. "I can at least try to fuck you on my knees."

"Don't hurt yourself, baby," Jeonghan says though he does as he's told, eyes never leaving Seungcheol's.

Baby. Butterflies erupt in Cheol's belly, fluttering around the ball of liquid heat there, at the pet name and he leans down for a slow kiss.

There's nothing Choi Jaesung hates more than a liar. Which, he relents, is the peak of irony. But even after all he's done against Sanghoon's gang, the gang he helped create, his opinion still stands. Liars are the scum of the earth, no different than traitors, and they deserve to be treated as such. Without mercy.

"You're supposed to get close with him, yes, and you can do that however you want. But if it's interfering with your job - "

"It hasn't… there honestly hasn't been much to report. I've been talking with him and the others and there's just nothing of importance."

Jaesung never expected his nephew, his own flesh and blood, to be a dirty, rotten liar but here they are. Seungcheol insisted his little thing with Jeonghan wasn't impeding his work and for a few days Jaesung believed him. Until the entire gang got the same message from Joshua: that Yooseok had all but decimated Jun K.'s boys down in Miryang, they'd squared off against some of his men, and that Seungcheol had taken a bullet. For Jeonghan.

If that isn't impeding with work, what is?

The tinny ringing in his ear crackles through his phone's speaker as he waits for Byungchul to pick up. It's late enough that he should be far from any prying eyes or ears which is good. Because this is a conversation Jaesung can't risk anyone hearing; he himself is in his bathroom, shower running, cheap burner phone in hand. One that Wonwoo doesn't even know about.

Finally Byungchul picks up with a huff. "This better be important, Jaesung. I was sleeping."

"Seungcheol took a bullet for Yoon."

There's no point in beating around the bush, and Byungchul stutters something Jaesung can't make out. "I - what? He what?"

"They went up against Yooseok's men in Miryang and instead of letting Jeonghan get shot, Seungcheol stepped in the fucking way." He spits his words through gritted teeth, anger coursing through his veins like fire. Everything could've ended with that, and it would've been so much less hassle than all of this. But *no*. Loverboy had to go and play hero like the idiot he is. "He's in too deep. He won't be killing Jeonghan any time soon, won't *let* him be killed. Which means Yooseok will have to do it."

Which is what they planned, but still.

"Are they attacking soon?" He sounds more awake now. Good.

"Yooseok's not ready, especially with the setback down in Miryang. We figured Daewon would send someone, not that Jeonghan would go. So we'll

just keep pushing for a delay until Yooseok's ready. And then Jeonghan will die 'in a rival gang battle'. If we're lucky so will some of the other teenagers he calls confidantes. Like Joshua. He'll push for a leader spot when Jeonghan dies and I'll take care of him when he does, but it'd be nice if Yooseok's men could do that for me." He sighs lightly. "Either way, I'll take over and no one will know what I've had planned for years. And then I'll have what should've been mine decades ago."

Byungchul's quiet for a few moments, no doubt processing this, and then he sighs himself. It's heavy and crackles over the line. "And Seungcheol?"

Seungcheol. He snorts. "You mean my traitor of a nephew? I don't give a shit. He was never really supposed to survive this anyway, either at Jeonghan's hand or mine or Yooseok's. Call it my last revenge on Jaehwan's behalf."

"Understood," Byungchul says. "Is that all?"

"Yes."

Jaesung hangs up before Byungchul can and sets the phone down. He'll take it apart later, make sure no one can trace the call, but first he turns off the shower and just *thinks*. He obviously can't let Seungcheol know his true intentions; he's been keeping them from him this entire time and there's no way he's slipping up now, not with how close they are. So he'll stick to the sidelines as he's been doing, prod Seungcheol for information, make sure Yooseok won't fuck this up.

Because Jaesung's getting what he wants. No matter who's standing in his way.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you all so much for 3.5k! i never thought this would get that far, and i'm so grateful to each and every one of your for your continued love and support! <3

also i'm doing a poll on my twitter for what my next au should be, since i'm pretty certain this has about 9-10 chapters left. so feel free to go vote if you want!

thank you guys for reading! love you all! <3

Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

lmao so this was supposed to be all fluff with some smut..... but i'm really bad at fluff so there's angst here too. my bad.

also all i listened to while writing this chapter was "fallin flower" and "it's you" by super junior so. you know.

tw: mentions of blood, past (very) minor character (parent) death, past traumatic events.

seventeen: like thunder

The house on Yeongheungdo is so much nicer than Seungcheol imagined; but of course it is. According to Jeonghan, it's worth at least a billion won and Seungcheol believes it. It's two stories with furniture nice enough to rival that in Jeonghan's Gangnam apartment, with its own private beach. It was even deep cleaned before their arrival and stocked with everything they could need (including several different bottles of flavored lube, or so Jeonghan tells him with a wicked grin. Seungcheol hopes that no one they know was involved in the purchasing and stocking of these items but he has a sinking suspicion it was Junhui or something; someone who'd stay quiet about it but maybe tease them about it later, alone). Which is preferable because Seungcheol doesn't really want to leave the house for as long as possible. Though the idea of grocery shopping with Jeonghan is so domestic it almost hurts.

They unload the car and set their bags on the living room floor but before Seungcheol can even put his hands on Jeonghan, Jeonghan insists they need to unpack because "if we don't do it now we're never gonna get it done". So Cheol relents and they turn some music on as they rifle through the bags they brought. They put clothes away in dressers and closets, organize their bathroom stuff, take stock of what's in the kitchen. And then sometimes Seungcheol drops what he's doing and busts a move to whatever song comes on that he vaguely knows choreography to (a lot of girl group songs,

actually). And Jeonghan laughs while he watches him, full-bodied giggles that Seungcheol loves more than any music.

By the time they finish unpacking everything they both collapse exhausted on the couch to the soft sound of rain pattering against the windows. Seungcheol shifts so that he can rest his head on Jeonghan's lap, and Jeonghan moves his head for a moment to put a pillow beneath it. Like this, he meets his gaze and smiles at the fondness in Jeonghan's eyes. It doesn't take long for Cheol to fall asleep, surrounded by Jeonghan's warmth and the lulling rain outside. The last thing he remembers is Jeonghan carding slow, sweet fingers through his hair.

"You know, Chan and I used to come here every summer with our eomma."

A few hours later they're still sitting on the couch, Jeonghan burrowed in Seungcheol's arms, stomachs full of dinner and eyes drooping. The rain has slowed to a soft, barely there drizzle.

"That sounds nice," Cheol murmurs, stroking Jeonghan's hair from his eyes. "It's a beautiful house."

Jeonghan nods as his eyes slowly scan the room, a young, wistful smile on his face. "Actually most of this decor and the furniture, she picked out. Since we used to come here so often she convinced abeoji to put money into it."

They sit quietly for a few moments and Seungcheol knows there's more Jeonghan wants to say. But he won't push him. He just curls gentle fingers through his soft hair and waits patiently.

And when Jeonghan finally speaks his voice is gentle, introspective. "We had this house in Hwaseong," he murmurs. "My childhood home, really. Eomma didn't want anything to do with abeoji's life so she tried to shield us in the countryside. I guess it worked because for the first ten years or so of my life, I thought my abeoji was a superhero."

The thought is definitely out of place for someone like Sanghoon and Cheol struggles to wrap his mind around it. “Like - like an Avenger?”

“Exactly,” Jeonghan says. “I mean, he was gone all the time, and sometimes he’d come home bloody and then when he was home he’d have to leave, usually at every call. Plus we were rich. So yeah, I thought he was Batman or something.”

It starts to make a bit of sense and Cheol can see it from a kid's point of view. “Maybe if Batman was a crime lord, yeah.”

“That’d be a good franchise.” He swallows the humor in his voice and sighs. “He started training me to take over for him when I was about ten.”

Seungcheol knows this, remembers Jeonghan ranting about this at Sanghoon’s memorial. But it still breaks his heart to hear it because no child should have to go through that.

“I learned how to fight, how to handle a gun - and I hated it,” Jeonghan continues. “I would cry and cry and cry and abeoji would - would hurt me sometimes. Hit me. Told me that crying was a weakness and I could never be weak if I wanted to be him.” A sad smile crosses his lips, and Cheol tightens his arm around him though his wound burns in protest. He didn’t know any of *this*. Of course he always assumed maybe Sanghoon had abused his son - hell, he remembers his own father saying the same kind of shit to him, hitting him too sometimes - but to hear it confirmed hurts and his heart aches for the child that had to endure that.

But Jeonghan keeps going, hands trembling until Seungcheol holds them. “Joke’s on him because I never wanted to be him. In fact, I wanted to be the exact opposite. Well maybe not the exact opposite but I wanted to be a prosecutor growing up. Back when I thought my father was a superhero, I wanted to help him put bad guys behind bars. And then I found out he *was* one of those bad guys and everything just… kind of fell apart. And I wanted nothing to do with him. But he didn’t give a shit.”

“I could see you as a prosecutor,” Seungcheol murmurs. “Maybe we would’ve met back when - when I was…”

The words die on his tongue because such a reality seems too good to be true. A reality with no lies, none of this gang bullshit. Maybe they could've been happy.

Jeonghan just sighs lightly and squeezes Cheol's hands. "He never would've let me. And I realized that early on. Honestly I think ultimately I started to suck it up and just let him train me because I knew it was either me or Channie and I refused to let that happen to him. He's so much like our mother, so kind and happy. Her soul was too pure for this, so's his and I knew I needed to protect him."

There's so much Seungcheol wants to ask but he doesn't know how much of it Jeonghan will answer. "Will you tell me about her?" he whispers. "Your mom?"

He doesn't speak at first and Seungcheol hopes he isn't shutting down. But then Jeonghan looks at him, unshed tears in his eyes, and Cheol kisses his forehead. "I miss her." His sweet voice cracks on the last syllable.

"You don't have to keep talking, angel. It's okay."

"But I… I want to," and Seungcheol hears the weight in his words, the truth in them. "I want you to know because I trust you."

They share a soft kiss meant to comfort and then Jeonghan shifts in his arms so he can rest against his chest. He's so warm, so small, so fragile - yet he's one of the most courageous people Seungcheol knows, because the amount of strength it takes to talk about this? The amount of strength needed to just go on? Seungcheol admires him. So he waits once more. Waits for Jeonghan to open up to him because he knows how precious and rare it is and he refuses to take it for granted.

"Abeoji tried hard to hide our identities," he says eventually, fingers playing with the buttons on Seungcheol's shirt. "When he would take me with him places, I was to wear a mask and a hat and never speak. And technically he never actually married my mother so that way it wouldn't be on public record. Both Chan and I weren't born in a hospital, and on our birth certificates our family names are 'Lee', which is our mother's name." He

sighs a bit. “There was a Lee Jeonghan out there who graduated high school and applied to college so he could go to law school but never got to attend because Yoon Jeonghan, and Yoon Sanghoon, killed him.”

It’s hard to swallow, the thought that Jeonghan never got to do what he wanted. That Chan’s chasing his dreams, that Seungcheol got to chase his own. That so many of the people around them are doing what they want. But not Jeonghan.

He breathes in slowly, and then exhales. And every muscle in his body tenses. “And then when I was around fifteen, someone found out about us,” he whispers and dread settles like a stone on Seungcheol’s heart because he knows where this is going, “someone who wanted to hurt us and abeoji. I-I don’t know how he found us but he did and he broke in one night. Abeoji was in the city and I had just come home from studying. Usually - usually eomma would stay up to make sure I got home but I didn’t see her that night.”

The next breath he takes is shaky and it wracks his body like a sob. So Cheol holds him tighter. “Jeonghan, you don’t have to - “

“I need to.”

So Seungcheol stays quiet and lets him, offering his silent support through strokes and rubs up and down his spine.

“I was about to go down the hall to her room to see if maybe she’d fallen asleep,” Jeonghan whispers, “and-and then… I saw her. The carpet was - was red and she wasn’t moving and…” He fists Seungcheol’s shirt in his hand, squeezes his eyes shut.

So Cheol takes said hand, gently unclasps it, and brings it to his mouth for kisses. It’s the most he can do right now, even though he wishes there were more.

“I heard him move before I saw him and then I just - instinct kicked in, I guess. I don’t really remember how but I was able to get his gun away from him. And he was on his knees and he was pleading and all I could think about was how he’d killed my mother. How I wasn’t sure if Channie was

still alive or not. I'd never killed a man before but that didn't matter because of what he'd done. So I aimed the way abeoji taught me and pulled the trigger. Over and over again."

Seungcheol doesn't realize Jeonghan's crying until he feels tears on his shirt and he holds him so tight. And his heart breaks, like it always does, for the sweet man in his arms and all he's had to go through. It's not fair, Seungcheol knows this because this life is *never* fair, but to have to endure that at fifteen? To have to find your mother's body and kill the person who did it, at fifteen?

It's not fair.

Jeonghan wipes at his eyes and sighs. It comes out shuddering. "Eomma was cold by time I got to her but I still held her. I still willed her to wake up because there was no way she could be dead. Not when Chan and I were both so young. And-and then I heard him sobbing. Screaming 'hyung' from upstairs."

He squeezes Seungcheol's hand to the point where he feels like his fingers might break. But he squeezes back, trying not to picture it, trying not to think about it. Trying to swallow past the lump in his throat because he's not gonna cry. Not when Jeonghan needs him.

"He was eleven years old," he whispers, "and I wasn't going to let him see her like this. See what I had done. So I yelled at him, told him to hide in his closet until someone came to get him. And then I called abeoji."

After that, he doesn't speak. Just stays still in Seungcheol's arms, with the exception of his stuttering breaths. And Seungcheol remembers what Jeonghan's NIS file had said. How he killed his first man at fifteen and went to school the next morning. Cheol had used that information to paint the picture of a cold, methodical killer when now he knows that couldn't be farther from the truth. And he hates himself for ever thinking that way about Jeonghan. His sweet, strong Jeonghan.

He swallows against the lump in his throat, draws shapes into Jeonghan's back with his fingers. "Jesus. That's… horrible doesn't even begin to cover

it. Hannie, I'm so sorry."

"That's this life," he whispers, sounding so clinical it almost hurts. "And I'm - I'm not angry anymore. Just sad. And I miss my eomma. She'd be - she'd be really proud of Chan."

"She'd be proud of you too, Jeonghan. How selfless and kind you are. Everything you do is for the people around you, to protect them. And I've never said it but… I'm proud of you. I admire you."

Jeonghan just buries his face in Seungcheol's chest.

And that night, they don't have sex. They just undress and Seungcheol holds Jeonghan as close as he can, heart full of love for him.

They spend their time on Yeongheungdo doing whatever they want. Sleeping, fucking, watching dramas, eating. They go grocery shopping together. They go on drives. Seungcheol sits on the beach while Jeonghan plays in the water and he touches him when he comes back wet, litters kisses along his sun-kissed skin. And since it's a private beach they let their hands roam. On more than one occasion Cheol's had to listen to Jeonghan complain about having sand where he never wants to get it again and Seungcheol just kisses him hard to remind him why the sand's there in the first place. Some days they spend entirely in bed, sleeping. Others they spend apart, doing things the other doesn't want to do, and it's not awkward when they return to each other for dinners they cook together. It's so domestic it makes Seungcheol's heart hurt.

And he never wants to leave.

"You're doing so good for me, angel."

Jeonghan responds with a whimper, legs spread as wide as he can. He's bound to the bed at his own request, with a couple cheap ties they picked up

from a store in town. And in Seungcheol's eyes he's never looked better. They've been going at it for a couple hours now, and most of that has been spent with Seungcheol's fingers inside him, slowly fucking him open because Jeonghan insisted he wanted it that way. And Cheol is never one to deny him what he wants.

"Please fuck me," Jeonghan whines, trying to get purchase on the fabric around his wrists. He's all marked up, flushed and begging, and the white heat building in Seungcheol's gut, between his legs, only grows hotter. "Cheollie please. I-I need you inside me *please."*

He presses the pads of his four fingers against Jeonghan's prostate and strokes achingly slow. It does exactly what he wants: Jeonghan cries out, arching so beautifully against the mattress. "Not yet, baby," Seungcheol whispers but he's not sure Jeonghan processes it, let alone hears it. "You can take a little more like this, hmm? I know you can. You're such a good boy, so good for me, Jeonghannie."

Almost every day at least one of them wants to explore something new in the bedroom. Or out. They've fucked on almost every surface in this house: the kitchen counters and table, the living room couch, the bedroom balcony, the shower, the bathtub… and then *in* bed, they've experimented with toys, blindfolds, gags. Jeonghan even topped one night - and then decided that he hated it because "it's too much work". But just like they've explored each other through conversation and actions, they also explore each other like this. Hot and sweaty and breathless, in ways no one else will know them.

Seungcheol eventually takes pity on Jeonghan and pushes inside him. And they fuck the way Cheol prepped him: slow and thorough. They cling to each other. Like this, it takes longer than usual for them both to reach an orgasm but it's just as good as rough and punishing because Seungcheol gets to hold him so close. Gets to bury himself in Jeonghan's warmth and soft, damp skin; gets to lose himself in Jeonghan's heavy breaths and sweet moans in a way he can't when they fuck fast. And when they both finally come it's so satisfying. They stay like that for a few moments until Jeonghan whines about being sticky.

He ends up falling asleep soon after Cheol cleans him up.

“Seokmin likes chicken too, right?” Seungcheol glances from the bag of chicken breasts in his hand to Jeonghan, who’s reading something on his phone. Apparently he didn’t hear him so with a light sigh Seungcheol moves to press a kiss to Jeonghan’s cheek. Right in the middle of a tiny market isn’t the best place for PDA but it always gets Jeonghan’s attention; sure enough he meets Cheol’s gaze with a soft blush and an apologetic smile.

“Sorry baby,” he murmurs as he locks and pockets his phone. And after a quick glance around they share a soft kiss. “What’d you say?”

“Just asked if Seokmin likes chicken too.” But that’s less important than the worry settling on Jeonghan’s face. “What’s wrong, angel? Everything okay?”

He sighs but nods. “Just stuff with Yooseok. Wonwoo and Joshua keep insisting we wait but I… I don’t want to. I never have. If we’d just gotten this over with as soon as we found out he was involved…” Another sigh escapes his lips and then he smiles. “You know what? Enough about work. I’m - I’m just stressing. But I’m excited for tomorrow.”

Joshua had texted a few days ago and said that he and Seokmin would be in Hamgyeongmo for some business tomorrow and Jeonghan had asked if they’d like to come over for dinner, since that’s maybe a half hour drive from Yeongheungdo. A double date of sorts. So they’re here now, at some market twenty minutes from the house, shopping for food. But Jeonghan’s spent most of it absorbed in his phone.

Seungcheol sighs softly. “We don’t have to do it if you’re not up for it, Hannie.”

“I want to. I miss them. Besides, it’ll be good to get my mind off things, since I’ll make sure Shua won’t talk business.”

“Only if you’re sure.” He sets the bag of chicken in their cart and then, public be damned, takes Jeonghan in his arms. Slides his hands up beneath his shirt a bit to stroke at the warm, bare skin near the small of his back.

Comforting touches that have Jeonghan resting his head on Cheol's good shoulder. "I worry about you, Jeonghan. And if you're stressed - "

"I'm okay," he murmurs. "I promise."

Seungcheol gently lifts his head with one hand and they share another kiss. Though still technically chaste it's a little firmer than the one before and Seungcheol cups the back of Jeonghan's head, slides his fingers into his soft hair, parts his lips to swallow the little contented noise Jeonghan utters. It makes his head spin all the same, makes his stomach flip, makes his toes curl because kissing Jeonghan is his favorite thing in the world.

They pull away at some unseen cough and Jeonghan's bright red, muffling embarrassed giggles in Seungcheol's collar.

And Seungcheol just holds him tight, heart swelling with so much love.

They end up in a food fight of sorts while making dinner for their double date and while everything cooks they hop in the shower. Jeonghan takes it upon himself to clean Seungcheol with roaming hands that are a lot more wicked than Jeonghan would have him believe. They roam his body, focusing on each and every sensitive part of him to the point where Seungcheol's so worked up he can't focus on anything else but Jeonghan. He's pressed up against the cold shower wall, hips canting in time with Jeonghan's strokes. And Jeonghan touches him slowly, pumping his cock with soft hands and words.

It reminds him of the time after the wedding, when Jeonghan had worshipped his body so thoroughly Seungcheol thought he'd come from that alone. How incredible it felt to lay back and let someone else take charge; remind him that he deserves to be loved back the way he loves. So he easily gives up control and lets Jeonghan touch him like this, heat building in his body. It's a soft heat, bolstered by the hot water running down his body, one that promises a calm orgasm, but he enjoys it all the same because it's Jeonghan.

“Hannie,” he moans, tilting his head back as Jeonghan thumbs at his slit. “Ha-Hannie, I’m gonna - I wanna come.”

“You look so good like this,” Jeonghan whispers, deep and husky, and it’s Seungcheol’s favorite sound in the world right now. “So beautiful, Cheollie. You like it when I touch you like this, don’t you?”

That shouldn’t have the effect on him that it does and maybe one night they’ll explore this further: Jeonghan in charge, having his way with him. But for now Seungcheol just wants to come. “Yeah,” he breathes, eyes squeezed shut. “Don’t stop, okay? Wan-wanna come.”

Jeonghan leaves wet kisses along his neck and embers coil in his gut, threatening to catch fire. “Then come for me, Cheollie.”

He does as he’s told, spilling into Jeonghan’s fist with a broken moan that echoes off the shower walls. And then he’s in Jeonghan’s arms, being held so tight.

They stay like that until the water turns cold, just breathing the other in.

Somehow they didn’t burn dinner and everything’s hot and ready to go when Joshua and Seokmin walk in. Hugs are given and Seokmin plays with the locks of Jeonghan’s hair that fall into his eyes, telling him how good it looks. Then they sit around the dining table and eat by candlelight.

Seungcheol stays quiet during most of it, opting to just watch the way the three of them interact. It’s obvious how much Jeonghan adores these two, that even though he shouldn’t pick favorites as a leader or hyung, Joshua and Seokmin definitely are his favorites. And they tell stories Seungcheol’s never heard before, stories about Jeonghan as a kid, as a teenager. Some of the shit he and Joshua would get into, like running away for a week after they graduated high school. They went wherever the wind (and Jeonghan’s black credit card) took them, and then came back to find that the only people who missed them were Chan and Seokmin.

At this, Seokmin squeezes his boyfriend's hand with one of his patented, face-splitting grins. "What can I say? I've been in love with you forever."

Jeonghan coos and reaches for Seungcheol's hand too, bringing it up to his mouth for a kiss.

The smile they share warms Seungcheol's heart and he doesn't ever want to leave.

Not long after, soju was brought out and Joshua and Seokmin decided to stay over in one of the guest rooms. But since it's Seokmin and Jeonghan they ended up passing out snuggling on the living room couch, leaving Cheol and Joshua awake. They take a bottle of soju for them both and head out to the back porch, the one that leads to the private beach. The moon is almost full and reflected so clearly in the glassy waters. And with a clear sky Seungcheol can see more stars than he can count. More stars than he's ever seen in the night sky before.

"We're getting closer to outing Jaesung," Joshua murmurs after swallowing a swig from the bottle. His voice is like a shout in the quiet night.

Seungcheol sighs. He doesn't want to think about that; he wants to stay in this little world where nothing exists outside this island. So he doesn't say a word in response, just takes a drink from the bottle. And after he swallows he whispers, "He's in love with me."

He blames the alcohol, blames Joshua and Seokmin being so loving which has made Jeonghan clingy in return.

"I know he is."

"I'm gonna break his heart."

Joshua sighs heavily and reaches for the bottle. "But you'll save his life. And maybe he'll forgive you."

"If he does, I won't go back to him."

It hurts saying it aloud, but it's been weighing on his mind for weeks now. Fluttering around the back of his head, a constant reminder of how fleeting their time together is.

"You're returning to the NIS."

It's a statement, not a question, but Seungcheol still nods. He watches the waves crash on the shore, remembering a few days ago when Jeonghan had gotten a mouthful of salt water for standing too close to a massive swell. It brings an ephemeral smile to his lips and then he sighs again. "Or maybe I'll quit and head for L.A. or something. Be with my eomma, join a police force out there. Either way, I can't stay here. My whole life I've wanted to be a cop and this… this hasn't changed that. And I can't ask Jeonghan to give this up. As much as he hates it, it's his life. It's all he knows." He reaches for the bottle and takes a long swig. Swallows it. Sighs once more. Tries to ignore the aching, the hurt gnawing at his heart. "I won't talk - "

"I know," Joshua murmurs. "And Jeonghan will realize that too."

He sets the bottle down between their chairs and closes his eyes. It's not fair, but it never has been. And that's what hurts the most, the fact that he could've stopped this weeks ago. Stopped himself from falling for Jeonghan because he knew there was no way it could end up in their favor. There was never going to be a happy ending for them. At least not together.

No matter how badly he wants one.

"Joshie?"

God. The grin that spreads across Joshua's face is the sweetest, most endearing thing he's ever seen and Cheol watches as Seokmin slowly comes to them. He curls up in Joshua's lap, nuzzles into his neck, and Joshua holds him.

The selfish, jealous part in Seungcheol's soul doesn't want anyone else to be happy if he has to let go of Jeonghan. But the hopeless romantic in him, the part that loves so deeply, so vividly no matter what, warms at the sight and

he hopes Joshua and Seokmin end up together. That they get the happy ending they deserve.

“Cheol-hyung?”

He’s got his face still buried in Joshua’s neck but Seungcheol smiles at Seokmin nonetheless. “What’s up?”

“Jeonghan-hyungie told me to tell you that he was heading upstairs and wanted cuddles.”

Seungcheol grins and stands up on slightly tipsy legs, sidestepping the half-full soju bottle. “I’ve been summoned.”

“Good night, Cheol,” Joshua says softly. “We’ll see you both in the morning.”

Jeonghan’s burrowed under the covers when Seungcheol gets to him and immediately opens his arms so Cheol can rest in his warmth. Tears close up his throat as Jeonghan winds fingers through his hair but he doesn’t let them come. He just whispers “good night” and listens as Jeonghan’s breath evens out into something slow and calm.

One morning, maybe a week later, Seungcheol wakes up to the sound of someone, something huffing and puffing and after that everything else kind of comes into focus. He sits up and rubs the sleep from his eyes, and only then does he find the source of the heavy breathing filling the room. Jeonghan leans against the doorframe to their bedroom in damp workout clothes, dark hair wet and sticking to his forehead, skin flushed. All he can seem to get out are pants and gasps and Seungcheol would find it sexual if he weren’t worried about his boyfriend.

“Hannie?” he asks, voice rough with sleep as he tries to get out of bed. His injury twinges beneath the bandage but he ignores it in favor of stumbling over on shaky legs and cupping Jeonghan’s face in his hands. Worry thunders

through his body in the form of a pounding heart. “Hey, breathe baby. It’s okay. Come on, breathe with me. You’re okay.”

“I’m not,” he wheezes, “n-not panicking. I just ran half a mile on the beach and…”

It takes a moment for his words to register in Seungcheol’s brain but when they do Seungcheol huffs a sigh. “You mean to tell me you’re hyperventilating because you ran half a mile?” He doesn’t know whether to laugh or scold him.

In between heavy breaths and gasps Jeonghan fixes him with a look. But it doesn’t last long because he leans forward to rest his head against Seungcheol’s shoulder. “My chest hurts.”

“Then maybe don’t run half a mile if you’re this out of shape, angel.” He holds Jeonghan close, though, strokes gentle hands up his back. “Why don’t we take a bath, baby? We’ll start out cold, cool you down?”

Jeonghan just nods against him. “I wish you weren’t still injured because then you could carry me.”

Seungcheol grins to himself because he’d carry Jeonghan in a heartbeat, he knows it. “You can lean against me though, angel.”

Together, they take slow steps to the massive bathroom that rests off their bedroom. Seungcheol starts the water at a slightly cooler than lukewarm temperature and helps Jeonghan undress and then get into the tub. After that he adds some bubbles and heads for the door.

“Seungcheollie,” Jeonghan whines, making grabby hands like he’s a child, but it’s endearing.

So Seungcheol goes back to him and leans down for a gentle kiss. “I’ll be right back, baby. I’m getting you water and some food, okay?”

He smiles at this and lets Seungcheol go as he sinks deeper into the rising water.

They've been here on Yeongheungdo for about four weeks now, and Seungcheol doesn't want to leave. Not when he goes to bed every night next to a warm, naked Jeonghan, clinging to him like he'll die if he lets him go, and wakes up to a similarly clingy Jeonghan, even if he's having a heart attack from exercising. That's only happened this one time though; every other morning Cheol wakes up to Jeonghan pressing against him. And usually that leads to sex. Soft, sleepy sex with his mouth around Jeonghan's cock, prepping him nice and slow to the point where Seungcheol doesn't even really wanna fuck him; it's more than enough to watch Jeonghan come apart on his fingers. And there's no one to interrupt them: no responsibilities, no right-hand men, no dongsaengs. No rats, no traitorous uncles. Just them.

It's so nice.

With a light sigh Seungcheol gets some fruit from the refrigerator, washes it, and puts it on a plate. Next he grabs a couple glasses and fills them with water. And then somehow he's able to carry all this back to the bathroom where Jeonghan is all but drowning in the warm water and bubbles.

"Enjoying yourself, baby?" he asks as he gently sets everything down on the floor beside the tub.

Jeonghan nods and gives him a soft smile that turns his insides to mush. "Wanna join me?"

He stops for a moment to just look at Jeonghan, wet and sudsy and smiling, and his heart aches. "Of course I do."

Jeonghan shifts so that Cheol can sit behind him and then he's pulling Jeonghan back against his chest, holding him as tightly as his still-healing wound will allow. And they're silent for a few minutes, just enjoying the warmish water and each other's company. Honestly, it can't get much better than this and Seungcheol drops soft kisses along Jeonghan's bare shoulder.

"I've been thinking," Jeonghan murmurs finally, "that we should head back soon."

He sounds hesitant, like Seungcheol feels, but he tries to pretend like Jeonghan's words don't scare him because of the insinuations they hold. The ones Jeonghan has no idea they hold. "If you want, angel. You know I won't force you."

He sighs. "I mean, it's been a month so we probably *should* go back…"

"But you don't want to," Seungcheol whispers. And when Jeonghan nods, Cheol nuzzles his neck. "I know, baby. Me too. I want to stay here with you forever."

Because going back means eventually facing Jaesung. Going back means telling Jeonghan the truth and as fucking selfish as it is, he's not ready to give Jeonghan up. Not yet.

"Are we crazy?" Jeonghan whispers. He shifts, and the water splashes a bit against the sides of the tub, so he can turn his head and meet Cheol's gaze and there's a look in his eyes Seungcheol hasn't seen since their first morning here.

He remembers that morning well, waking up to Jeonghan's trembling voice, on the phone with Joshua. He'd laid quietly, eyes still closed, and listened. Jeonghan had told his best friend, through tears, that he was *scared.* That he couldn't do this, couldn't be boyfriends with Seungcheol because it was terrifying. And whatever Joshua said had calmed him a little; Seungcheol officially "woke up" so that he could comfort Jeonghan more though. He remembers so clearly the way Jeonghan just burrowed into him, so small and delicate, clinging to him like a lifeline. How he'd sobbed apologies into his shoulder and Seungcheol had just held him through it. And when he calmed down he'd pulled back and looked at Cheol like this: with sad dark eyes tinged with fear.

It's a look he hates.

"Crazy for what, baby?" he asks now, smoothing a hand down Jeonghan's spine.

“This,” he says, panic seeping into his voice. “We - we’ve known each other for like two months and I’m…”

They don’t say those words very often, if at all. No, their love for each other comes out in the things they do. Jeonghan snuggling close every night, opening up to Seungcheol little by little until he’s able to piece most of his childhood together. Making sure Seungcheol eats enough at every meal they share, changing his bandages as needed, brushing soft kisses above the gauze when he finishes. Seungcheol always needing to touch him, sitting quietly when Jeonghan wants to talk about anything. Combing through his hair every day because it’s starting to get long again (it falls over his ears now and when Jeonghan noticed he got so excited he *squealed).* Seungcheol knows Jeonghan loves him, even if he never says it because they’re both scared of it for different reasons.

“I don’t think that’s crazy,” he murmurs in response, reaching out to stroke along Jeonghan’s cheekbone. It doesn’t jut out like it did when they came here; a month of no stress and eating well has resulted in a softer, thicker Jeonghan and Cheol couldn’t be happier. The bags under his eyes have also lessened and he just seems so *happy.* “I mean, I’ve heard crazier love stories for sure.”

He leans into Seungcheol’s touch. “Really? Crazier than a gang boss and his bodyguard who used to hate each other?”

“Well maybe not in that regard.” He kisses his forehead. “But people who’ve fallen for each other in a shorter amount of time. So no, we’re not crazy. And we’re definitely not crazy for wanting to stay here.”

“It…” He sighs heavily. “It feels like I’m running from my problems. Like this is really irresponsible of me.”

They’ve had this conversation too, about two and a half weeks ago, and they’d sat and talked through each of Jeonghan’s problems, everything he might’ve been running from. And Seungcheol knows he’s restless. He sees it every night, pretending to be asleep when an insomniac Jeonghan rises from their bed and just stands on the balcony off their bedroom for hours. He’s not built for a life like this: calm, resting, relaxing. It’s not in his nature. He’s

itching to go after Yooseok, itching to see his men again. Itching for excitement to distract him from his mind.

(Of course, Seungcheol's been trying to ignore why he's *also* laying awake every night. Why he sees Jeonghan alone on their balcony at two a.m. when he should be fast asleep.)

"We can go back home, if you want," he murmurs near Jeonghan's temple, even though the words taste bitter on his tongue. "It's completely up to you, angel."

Jeonghan sighs again and leans his forehead against Seungcheol's. "What about you? Your injury?"

"I should probably be seen by a doctor," he says closing his eyes and trying to focus on Jeonghan's presence, "but it's healing. It doesn't hurt as bad as it has been. And the stitches fully dissolved yesterday."

"You've been able to move your left arm better too."

Seungcheol nods. "I should be healed enough to go after Yooseok."

"Don't push yourself," he whispers and something in his voice makes Seungcheol hold him so tightly, all but pulling him onto his lap. "I don't want to lose you."

Jeonghan's words settle like a vice on his heart and he seeks him out for a slow kiss, the kind that leaves them both breathless and a little worked up. The kind that leaves Jeonghan wanting more and Seungcheol's grateful for that because he can't say anything right now. Can't lie to him and promise Jeonghan that he won't lose him.

They end up coming together like that, Jeonghan in his lap, clinging to him with one of Seungcheol's hands around both of their cocks, and then he just holds Jeonghan so close.

"I don't want to lose you either," he whispers, and if he's ever told the truth, that's it.

Jeonghan doesn't say anything; he just clings to him.

Seungcheol opens up to him, too. It's nothing as drastic or tragic or Jeonghan but he still tells him things no one else really knows. How he developed a generalized anxiety disorder in the military and the only person who gave him any sort of sympathy for it would go on to join him at the police university and become his first boyfriend. How he initially felt betrayed when his mom got remarried, while he was still enlisted. But then he met his stepfather and younger stepsister upon his return home and loved them both. How he's wanted to be a cop all his life because they help people, they protect them. Jeonghan laughs at this - "not the cops I know" - and it makes Seungcheol sigh. They're curled up in bed after a particularly exhausting round of sex, sweat still sticking to their bodies.

And Jeonghan has a point.

"I know," Cheol murmurs. He reaches out to comb gentle fingers through Jeonghan's mussed hair. "I realized a while ago how naive it was of me to think that."

"It's not a bad thing."

"Hmm?"

Jeonghan sits up, then, and opens his arms. Seungcheol doesn't even hesitate as he burrows in his warmth, Jeonghan's heartbeat under his ear. As much as he loves holding Jeonghan, comforting him, he loves this more. When Jeonghan holds *him.* Comforts *him.* Slow, delicate fingers carding through his hair, Jeonghan's warm cologne hitting his nose. Everything about being held by him is perfect and he wraps his arms around Jeonghan's waist.

"You being naive, it's not a bad thing," he finally murmurs. "It reminds me a lot of Chan, actually. You still have this - this innocence about you despite everything bad that's happened. You still look for the best in people. It makes you a good man because you - you don't let your prejudices get in the

way. And I… I love that about you. It's one of my favorite things about you, really."

"Yeah?"

Even though he can't see him, he can just hear Jeonghan smiling. "Yeah, Cheollie. I mean, it… it made you comfort me when I had panic attacks. It made you stay by my side after I had a drunken breakdown. It made you befriend all the boys when I was gone. It made you be a hyung to Chan."

At his words Seungcheol melts. There's nothing in him, about him except warmth. Nothing in him, about him except love for this man. Love for a man he knows he shouldn't, love for a man so complex and kind and selfless Seungcheol had no choice but to fall.

He doesn't say anything and Jeonghan keeps running his fingers through his hair until he falls asleep.

One morning when the weather is nice they get up early to go on a hike, per out of shape Jeonghan's request. Really it's just them driving around to the nearest trails and then spending half an hour walking around until Jeonghan starts whining. But Seungcheol doesn't mind. He actually kind of likes whiny Jeonghan because whiny Jeonghan equals hugs and kisses and clinging. And that's exactly what Jeonghan does. Hangs all over him with a "Cheollie, please can we go home?"

"You're the one that wanted to come out here and do this," Seungcheol says like they aren't turning around to go back to the car because he's never been able to say no to Jeonghan.

"Yeah but I'm tired," he whines. "And hungry."

"That's because you didn't eat the breakfast I made you." He leans in for a soft kiss, pulling Jeonghan close. He'll never get tired of this. Having Jeonghan all to himself, kissing him, touching him with abandon. And he just… he really doesn't want to leave. Doesn't want to lose Jeonghan.

“I wasn’t hungry then,” Jeonghan murmurs against his lips. “Can we get takeout on the way home? Please?”

Seungcheol sighs like it’s the biggest inconvenience of his life before he kisses him again. “Of course, baby. Anything you want.”

Jeonghan grins.

They make plans to come back here, once this is all over with Yooseok. They make plans to take a trip with Chan at the end of the semester in a few weeks, to celebrate his hard work. They make plans to visit L.A. because Jeonghan truly, sincerely wants to meet his family ("You've met mine and I want to meet yours."). They make plans for a future Seungcheol figures they won’t get but he doesn’t have the strength, the courage to tell Jeonghan that. Not with the light in his eyes as he looks up flights to Tokyo, giggling about Chan’s “superior Japanese skills”. Not with the way he leans into Seungcheol, playing with his fingers absentmindedly. Not with the way Seungcheol’s heart aches because he wants this. Wants to travel with Jeonghan, wants to build a future with him.

Wants to be his, truly.

Sometimes they fuck like they still hate each other. Like they did that first time, in the training room. Seungcheol isn’t sure what it is. Maybe they’re just taking out their subconscious anger on each other. For Seungcheol it’s the fact that, no matter what, this is probably it for him and Jeonghan; this is the most they’ll ever get of each other. For him it’s the fact that he’s mad at himself, *hates* himself even for what he’s doing to Jeonghan. And for Jeonghan he imagines… well, Jeonghan isn’t stupid. Deep down he must know the truth. So that’s why he scratches up Seungcheol’s back till he bleeds. That’s why he leaves marks too, bites down till he tastes copper. And that’s why Seungcheol denies him orgasms, preps him roughly. Why he pins him down and ties him up and fucks him into the mattress some nights.

Like tonight.

There's a thunderstorm raging outside, rattling the windows with the force of it. Pouring rain echoes between their heavy breaths and moans, and every few seconds Jeonghan is illuminated by a crack of white lightning. Seungcheol feels affected by it, inspired in a sort of morbid way. It seethes like the storm in his heart, in his soul, loud and intense and unending, leaving his body on edge. Like a livewire, electricity sparking in his veins.

Jeonghan's hands are bound at the small of his back, head down, ass up. Like this it's easier to keep him down. Have his way with him. And Seungcheol does. Looms over him, appreciating the marks he's left on Jeonghan's smooth, pale skin. Fucks into his tight heat with a quick, desperate rhythm. Reaches out and grasps Jeonghan's cock, squeezes the base to keep him from coming. There's nothing else but this, but Jeonghan. Pants and gasps, sweat dripping down his temples, fire in his veins that fuels his harsh groans and the dirty words he whispers. He knows he's being too rough, knows this isn't how he should be treating the man he loves.

But Jeonghan wants it as much as he does. Likes it as much as he does. His voice is hoarse and muffled in the pillows as he begs Seungcheol for more, harder, *faster,* and Seungcheol gives him what he wants. The blinding heat coiling his muscles, building in his gut, threatens to snap and he lets it. Comes deep inside Jeonghan as he releases the vice grip he has on his cock. And Jeonghan comes with a sharp, broken cry, sounding so delicate against the pounding thunder around them, spilling onto the sheets beneath them. And then it's over. For a few moments they stay like that, catching their breath. Taking silent, subconscious stock of sore limbs, scratches, bruises.

And then Seungcheol unties Jeonghan's wrists. Presses gentle kisses along the irritated skin, whispers soft praises about how incredible he is, what a good boy he is. And Jeonghan melts at it. Reaches out and strokes Seungcheol's cheek with none of the roughness his touch contained maybe half an hour ago, when he'd dug his nails into Cheol's skin until he broke it. Because as much as they punish each other; as much as they're living in denial, Jeonghan still loves him. And Seungcheol loves him too.

He cleans them up and Jeonghan curls up on the armchair in the corner of the room as Seungcheol changes the sheets too. And then they come back together on the bed, Jeonghan fitting against his body so perfectly Seungcheol's not sure anyone else there will feel right. Not long after that Jeonghan falls asleep with the ghost of a smile on his face.

But within a few hours he's awake again, staring at nothing from their balcony, and Seungcheol knows they'll be returning within the next few days. He can feel it in his gut, in the anxiety tugging at the back of his mind. He can feel it in Jeonghan's fidgety hands when he goes to hold him, bathed in moonlight. He can taste it in Jeonghan's hesitant kisses, the way he pulls away and avoids Seungcheol's eyes.

That's his tell. When he's nervous about something or doesn't know what to say.

He wonders if Jeonghan knows his tell too.

By now the thunder, both outside and in his heart, has stopped; there's just rain. Soft, pattering rain that makes Seungcheol feel nostalgic in a weird sort of way.

As scared as he is, Seungcheol has come to terms with it all.

"I want to go home," Jeonghan eventually whispers, squeezing Seungcheol's hands, and his voice is lost to the breezy night air.

But Seungcheol hears it. And he can't help the tears that climb up his throat. He doesn't let them out though; instead he buries his face in Jeonghan's neck and breathes in.

He can't do this anymore. Can't lie to Jeonghan, no matter what happens to him. No matter what Joshua and Wonwoo have planned. It - it hurts. Holding him so close, knowing it can't last. Knowing that no amount of time spent together, opening up in vulnerability, will make this easier on either of them. When everything comes to light it *will* hurt, of that Seungcheol is absolutely certain.

When they go home he'll tell him.

He needs to.

Of that, Seungcheol is certain too.

"Okay," he whispers, like they're not about to lose everything they hold dear. Like they're not about to lose each other. "We'll leave in the morning."

Jeonghan kisses him slowly, runs a hand down to his collarbone. Touches the new scar there, the one that holds all of the love between them. The one that Seungcheol will always treasure because it means he's alive. It means Jeonghan's alive. Because of him.

"Take me to bed," Jeonghan whispers.

So he does. Buries all of his grief, his sorrow, his anger in Jeonghan's warmth. Pins Jeonghan down and thrusts into him with a desperate pace that Jeonghan matches. Somehow, he has to know what's coming. Somehow, he has to know what awaits them back home because he clings to Seungcheol with a roughness he never feels. It's different than earlier when he'd scratched him. It's more intimate.

Hopeless.

When they come apart, Jeonghan snuggles into him. And Seungcheol thinks he hears a soft "I love you" leave his lips. It could just be a figment of his imagination, but either way he grasps onto it. Holds it so tight. And once Jeonghan's asleep, breathing deep and even against Seungcheol's chest, he whispers it back.

Notes for the Chapter:

so we're getting down to it.....

damn sc and his morals. now we're gonna have even more angst and NONE of us are ready not even me i'm -

as always thank you for reading!!! <3

Chapter 18

Notes for the Chapter:

this was a hard one to write, and that's why it's a bit later than usual.

tw: just angst. lots and lots of angst.

(uhhh also the title comes from "follow" by monsta x; specifically jooheon's "i feel good if i die young 'cause you're my killer" soooo)

eighteen: you're my killer

Seungcheol has spent his life believing himself to be a good man. His mother told him so, growing up; his teachers, commanding officers, and professors all said the same too. It's what the NIS released in an official statement, following the gunshot wound he'd sustained after his first case. So he's believed it, but never let it get to his head (or so he thought). Because if so many people say it's true, it must be, right? It doesn't help that he's been on what he's perceived to be the "good" side his entire life, as well. Growing up thinking men like his father, men like Sanghoon, Jaesung, Yooseok, and Jeonghan are irredeemable. Evil. He accepted this job because he thought he could *help.* He thought he was good enough to strike such evil from this world; he was stupid and naive and thought it'd be easy. A crusade against wickedness, led by Korea's preeminent law enforcement agency.

Now, he's not so sure it's all so black and white.

Now, *he* feels like the bad guy, the villain in the story.

He knows he's not (the real villain title has already been awarded to his uncle) but it nags at him still because of what he's going to do. Because of the hurt he's going to inflict on Jeonghan and the others, whether he wants to or not. And he *doesn't,* fuck he absolutely does not want to. But he will because he can't lie to them anymore. He will because it's not fair to them; they deserve the truth. Because even if something were to happen, even if the NIS were to destroy his records and no one else would know who he truly

was, *he* would. He would, and he would know the lies he's told. He would know that his and Jeonghan's entire relationship was built on the deception that Jeonghan could trust him.

And how can he truly trust him if Seungcheol is hiding so much from him?

He can't, in good conscience, let this go on.

(The voice in his head, the one that sounds so much like his eomma sometimes, would tell him that because he's going to expose everything, for the sake of the man he loves, for his friends, that he is indeed still a good man. But Seungcheol would argue against that, because a good man would not have allowed it to get this far. A good man would not have fallen for Jeonghan, would not have let him in. A good man would not have truly befriended the other members when he knows what awaits them all.

A good man would've accepted this weeks ago and pushed Jeonghan away. He wouldn't have been as selfish as Seungcheol had been, holding Jeonghan so close, kissing and touching and loving him like they had all the time in the world. Like nothing nefarious tugged at the very seams of him, of them, threatening to take them apart.

A good man would've swallowed down his feelings to protect the one he truly loves.)

It's raining when they return to Seoul in the morning; the thunderstorm over Yeongheungdo had traveled eastward and morphed into something a bit quieter overnight. Yet it still tugs at Seungcheol's heart, still feels foreboding. Like the universe knows exactly what he has planned. He leans his forehead against the cool passenger window as Jeonghan drives, watching rivulets of rain as they race down the glass. And he doesn't speak. He knows he should, that he needs to be pretending like nothing's wrong, but he can't help it. His mind is racing too quickly to make sense of any thoughts and he can't latch onto much except dread. Fear.

He's made his decision and there's no going back now. No matter what lies in store for him, for Jeonghan. No matter how the others might react. He needs to do this. For Jeonghan's sake, for their sake. And for his own.

The thought leaves his hands trembling and he reaches out to put one on Jeonghan's thigh. He squeezes it and lifts his head from the window to look at him. And goddamn it, Jeonghan gives him such a bright smile. It's the one that closes his eyes and shows off the chip in his tooth, the one that makes Seungcheol's stomach flutter. Except now. Now there's a knot of apprehension weighing him down and it's all he can think about.

"Cheer up, Cheollie," Jeonghan murmurs, turning his attention back to the street, though he moves one hand from the steering wheel to rest on Seungcheol's own. They're heading to headquarters, having already dropped everything off at the apartment, and Seungcheol balls his free hand into a fist, white-knuckled, as they get closer. "It'll be good to be home. We'll deal with Yooseok and then - and then we can go back to Yeongheungdo. Or we can go to Japan with Chan or…"

He thinks Seungcheol's distant because he doesn't want to be back here.

Which isn't far from the truth but still…

He squeezes Jeonghan's thigh again, warm and slender beneath his palm. Notes the way Jeonghan's shoulders are raised a bit. Tense. Like he doesn't want to be in Seoul either. Even though he was the one who said he was ready to go home. "I know, baby. Honestly, I'm just - I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

"I know." He sighs lightly and glances over to smile at him again. It's such a sweet, fond smile and it makes Seungcheol's heart hurt. "I felt you tossing and turning all night."

They pull into the parking garage beneath the building and Seungcheol's throat closes up.

"I'm sorry," he manages and Jeonghan unbuckles.

"Don't be, baby. It's okay."

They exit the car together and Seungcheol has maybe a few seconds to shut his door before Jeonghan's wrapping his arms around him; they share a soft

kiss. It's unhurried and intimate; Jeonghan's hands, rubbing comfortingly along his lower back, are unhurried and intimate. Like they have all the time in the world. And Seungcheol wants to commit him to memory. The way his lips feel, the way he tastes, the way he kisses. So he leans in again, captures Jeonghan's mouth in a rougher kiss. It's a lot more desperate than he wanted it to be, but Jeonghan responds by pressing closer to him, closing the distance between them. He slips his hands beneath Seungcheol's t-shirt, strokes his bare skin with warm, experienced fingers - because at this point he knows exactly how to touch him. It sends shivers down Cheol's spine and their tongues coil together and he never wants to let Jeonghan go.

So when Jeonghan breaks their kiss, Seungcheol leans down and burrows his face in the crook of his neck. Breathes him in; his expensive cologne; his sweet-smelling shampoo. He's so warm, so soft, so familiar, and Seungcheol wants to lose himself in this moment. Wants to stay like this, with Jeonghan all around him. Wants everything to just stop, for a minute, so he can be selfish.

But he's had his time. He's *been* selfish. And now he must face the consequences of his actions.

So he pulls away and gives Jeonghan a kiss to the forehead, sweeping his hair from his eyes. "Come on," he murmurs, "let's go see everyone."

They make their way upstairs to the meeting room, greeting everyone they come across. Jeonghan is bright as he talks, tucking locks of his hair behind his ears as best as he can (he's so happy it's getting longer again and Cheol knows how much he's missed the length). Grinning. And with his sun-kissed skin, light in his eyes… he's so beautiful. So Cheol tries to remember him this way: happy. But the closer they get to the meeting room the tighter Seungcheol's chest gets. The harder it is to breathe. And the quicker his thoughts race. He's going to do it in front of the others, that way *everyone* can hear his side of the story without distortion (and maybe Joshua and Wonwoo can back him up). But if he does… it'll embarrass Jeonghan, won't it?

Don't start making excuses now.

And then they're standing in front of the wooden double doors and Seungcheol's terrified. He shoves his hands into his pockets to keep them from shaking. Takes deep breaths to calm the thundering blood in his veins. *I have to do this I have to do this I have to do this -*

They're greeted by tight hugs and gushes over their longer hair, their tanned skin. A million unfinished stories float around the room as Jeonghan tries to get to his chair, but he's grinning so wide. Goddamn it he looks so joyful and Seungcheol's heart aches. Across the room he catches Joshua's curious gaze and he wonders if Joshua can see it in his eyes, that he's made his decision. That he's reached his breaking point.

And as everyone takes their seats, Seungcheol stays standing near the closed doors. Feels eleven pairs of inquisitive eyes on him, analyzing him, one of them softer than the others, and he can't *breathe,* can't hear over his heart pounding in his ears.

But he notices Joshua's gaze sharpening. Wonwoo's too.

Let me talk, he begs silently.

"Seungcheol?"

That's Jeonghan's voice, his sweet voice, calling for him in a tone laced with worry. Confusion. And Seungcheol meets his eyes. Forces himself to ignore what he sees there.

"There's something I need to tell you, Jeonghan," he says in a small, strained voice. "All of you."

Joshua's hands ball into fists on the tabletop and something flashes in his narrowed eyes. "Don't, Seungcheol. I swear to God."

Jeonghan looks between them, brows knitted in concern, but his own hands have started to shake. Seungcheol sees it before he hides them under the table. "What - what's going on?"

“Seungcheol,” Wonwoo tries in a vaguely threatening tone, all honorifics, all formality, gone.

But Seungcheol can’t stop now. No, Jeonghan has to know. The others, too. And he has to do it for himself; he’s been living this lie for so long, he feels it eating away at him. He can’t take it anymore.

This has to end.

Taking a shaking breath he ignores every other gaze on him but Jeonghan’s. And he commits him to memory again, for a moment. Just in case. The soft curve of his eyes, his perfect lips. He’s so heartrendingly beautiful, everything about him, and he’ll survive this, he *has* to, because he’s strong. Because he’s more than Seungcheol, more than the heartbreak that’s consumed him for so long. Even if he doesn’t think he is. “I love you,” he whispers, and even though he can count the number of times he’s said those words on one hand they feel familiar on his tongue. Like home. “I love you so much, you know that right?”

Jeonghan bites his bottom lip, tugs it between his teeth, that cute one with the little chip in it. God, he’s perfect. “Cheol, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

He breathes in again, lets it out slowly. His heart still pounds, his blood runs ice cold. But he keeps going. “Everything I’ve done over the last several weeks has been for you, to keep you safe. To keep Chan and your men safe. I need you to remember that, Hannie. That as soon as I realized my feelings for you, I didn’t want to hurt you. That I was on your side.”

“Goddamn it, Seungcheol,” he bites out. “What the hell are you talking about?”

But he knows. Seungcheol can see it in the darkness, the desperation in his eyes. He can hear it in his tight, shaky voice. He can feel it because at this point he knows Jeonghan as well as himself.

Which is why he has to do this.

“If you strike against Yooseok,” he says, “Jaesung can't find out.”

He frowns. “What? Why not?"

There’s no going back now.

“He… he's been an informant with the NIS for five years and is working with them and Yooseok to take you down."

Out of his peripheral, Seungcheol sees the others react. Quick turns of their heads as they meet each other’s gazes. Noises of disbelief, of shock, of confusion rise up around them.

And something flashes in Jeonghan’s eyes. Mistrust. Anger. But at who, Seungcheol isn’t sure. His shoulders tense. So does his gaze. “How - how do you know this?"

Somewhere nearby there’s a muffled curse that sounds vaguely like Joshua. But right now there’s no one except for Jeonghan in Seungcheol’s line of sight. No one on his mind, in his heart but him. He breathes in again, long and deep, and exhales. *One, two, three…* Looks Jeonghan in the eye even though everything in his body is screaming at him not to. Looks Jeonghan in the eye with all the others burning through him. Looks Jeonghan in the eye so he can see the moment his heart breaks because it’s what he deserves, for deceiving him.

This is the point of no return. There will be no coming back from this, and Seungcheol knows that.

He pushes forward, feeling like he might implode from the way his heart thunders throughout his body.

“I never left the NIS,” he whispers but it sounds like a shout in the pin-drop silence of the meeting room. “I-I’ve been undercover the last eight months, working with them to get information on the gang. On you.”

He counts the seconds that go by: *one, two, three, four.*

And then everything falls apart.

There's yelling nearby, hands grabbing at him, pistols and even knives shining in the morning sun as it filters through the windows. But it feels like a distant dream because he never lets go of Jeonghan's gaze. He watches the betrayal, the hurt, the *rage* that mix dizzyingly in his dark eyes. He watches the way his hands shake, the harsh breath he takes.

The tears he won't shed.

But he doesn't move. Doesn't speak. He's stone-cold, icy, so much like the man who tortured and shot Kyuwon without mercy. So much like the man who threatened Seungcheol in his father's kitchen. So much like the man who used to instill a hyperventilating sort of fear in Seungcheol's gut.

He's not his Jeonghan now. No, he's walled off, silent. Deadly. His father's son.

It's what Seungcheol deserves.

Something steps into his line of sight then, and everything else comes into focus. It's Minghao blocking him, thin, quiet Minghao with his silly giggles and affinity for good wine. Minghao who he's seen kill a man with his bare hands. He's a few centimeters, a mere breath, away and presses the unstained blade of his knife against Seungcheol's throat. Already it cuts into his skin, and stinging pain gives way to wet droplets of warmth beginning to roll down his neck. And Minghao glares at him, anger bright like fire in his eyes. With one flick of his wrist, he could slice Seungcheol open, jugular to jugular, and he'd bleed out all over the floor.

For a moment, he almost wills Minghao to do it.

"You've been betraying us this whole time?" he demands in a tight voice, through gritted teeth.

He'd put his hands up if he weren't being restrained by those he can't see. Soonyoung, he thinks, judging by the harsh breaths near his ear. Maybe Vernon too. "Let me explain," he says quietly, to anyone who might listen but he's not sure any of them will. Not with the fury, the violence in their eyes. Every single one of them looks at him like this, guns threatening his

existence, when just a few moments ago they were embracing him. Welcoming him home as one of their own. The self-hatred that digs into his body is enough to bring tears to his own eyes because he knows he's ruined everything. "Please."

Minghao glances around the room, at the faces of his friends, his companions - at these men who trusted Seungcheol with their lives - and then behind him at Jeonghan.

Who still hasn't spoken.

He grips the edge of the table with white knuckles, posture so rigid it looks painful, eyes downcast. Seungcheol wants him to talk, wants to know what he's thinking. Wants Jeonghan to give him the fury he deserves.

But it's not him that takes control of the situation. It's not Joshua, who sits still and glaring, whose plans have been ruined because Seungcheol couldn't continue the one thing he's been doing all along; it's not Wonwoo, who steps in front of Mingyu with placating hands but anger in his own eyes.

It's Junhui. Warm, comforting Junhui who adores all of them the same way Jeonghan does. Scary, dangerous Junhui who's killed more people than Seungcheol's met. Who wouldn't hesitate to harm those who hurt his loved ones.

"Then talk," he snaps as he comes to Minghao's side. And for just a moment, his eyes leave Seungcheol's to fall on Minghao. There's fondness in his gaze as he wraps his fingers around Minghao's own, as he gently pries the knife from his grasp. As he murmurs something in Mandarin, low and intimate.

Minghao steps away, even though he doesn't stop glowering at Cheol with sharp, powerful eyes. And, still gripped by Soonyoung and Vernon, Seungcheol speaks. His eyes flit around the room, at his friends (enemies?), the only people he has left now. The men he's sparred with, laughed with, ate with, strategized with. The men he's hugged and comforted.

All under the pretense of gathering information.

All so he could ultimately betray them.

“I… I was placed here by the NIS,” he says and he clears his throat when his voice comes out weak and shaky, “to glean information so they could take you all down. And for a few months, I relayed said information. And then Sanghoon died and everything changed.” He sighs heavily and the hands on him ease up minutely. But he still feels it. It gives him hope, small and warm like embers. “I swear to God, I had nothing to do with it. Jaesung and my section chief didn’t tell me it was happening but I knew I’d be blamed and I - “

There’s a snort from his right; Seungkwan’s shaking his head, face twisted in derision. “How are we supposed to believe you?”

“You’re not, I guess,” Seungcheol says quietly, because it’s a good point. “But I - I stopped giving them accurate information after…” He glances at Jeonghan, who’s still staring at the floor, head bowed. Jeonghan who, maybe half an hour ago, was holding him and kissing him and looking at him with so much love. And now? Now he can’t even lift his head and meet his gaze. Seungcheol sighs. “Well, after what happened between Jeonghan and I i-in the training room.”

Jeonghan’s hands twitch where they grip the edge of the table. But he still doesn’t look up.

“I just… I couldn’t do it anymore,” Seungcheol whispers, willing Jeonghan to meet his gaze. Willing him to *understand.* “Even back then I guess I knew how I felt and I - “

“That’s a load of bullshit,” Jihoon snorts, dwarfed where he stands next to Mingyu and Wonwoo. But he’s still as threatening and deadly as the rest of them, gun in his hands. “You just - “

“No it’s not.”

Joshua’s calm, even voice cuts through the air and Seungcheol breathes an actual sigh of relief because maybe Jeonghan will listen. Maybe the others will too. And all eyes turn to him, even Jeonghan’s. From this angle

Seungcheol can't quite see the look in his eyes but with his dark hair falling in them, with how tensely his jaw is set...

Junhui's eyes narrow as he frowns at Joshua. "You knew about this?"

"Yes," he says, sounding like a man on trial. "I found out and confronted Seungcheol. He has sent me each of the reports he gave to Jaesung and the NIS and I can confirm that he stopped giving them accurate, detailed information a few days after Sanghoon died. I can also confirm that he was not involved in Sanghoon's murder in any way; however the NIS was."

"That makes no sense," Junhui says. "How - "

"Wait," Seokmin asks, and his voice is quiet. God, he sounds so young. So… betrayed. And his eyes flit across the room, not really landing or focusing on a single person. Not even Joshua. "So Jaesung really is an informant?"

Joshua sighs heavily and nods. "Yes. He is. Wonwoo and I were able to procure those documents from NIS databases a few days ago. And yes, he knew Seungcheol was undercover. He actually wanted him here himself because he… his plan for years now was to take over. To off Sanghoon and Jeonghan and take everything for himself. But he needed to make it look like an outside job; hence the impending gang war with Song Yooseok."

Seungcheol nods as well, in agreement. "He knew though that once Sanghoon died, Jeonghan wouldn't keep him as close. So he needed someone loyal to him, who would give him information. And once everything went down he planned to use me as a scapegoat." He sighs a bit, eyes flicking to Jeonghan's rigid form once again. "He just didn't expect… this all to happen."

After this, no one speaks. All eyes fall from Joshua and Seungcheol, finding elsewhere to stare. Cheol can all but see the wheels turning in their heads as they try to make sense of this information. The quick, confused looks they send each other. The nerves weighing them down, making them tug at their fingers and tap their feet and pull at their clothes. And Seungcheol realizes – they had no idea. They didn't know Jaesung has also been betraying them,

deceiving them for so long. Fuck, their entire world is falling apart and it's all Seungcheol's fault.

You're not the one that created this mess of lies, his mind tries to argue. Tries to place the blame solely on Jaesung and his malicious intentions.

But isn't Seungcheol to blame too? Did he not contribute to the deception? Did he not take an active role in everything, in lying to the man he loves, in lying to these men who he called friends?

"Let him go."

Jeonghan's voice, hoarse and thick with emotions Seungcheol can't put his finger on, cuts like a knife through the tense silence. It's simultaneously the sweetest and scariest thing Seungcheol has ever heard because it reminds him of a Jeonghan he thought long since gone. A Jeonghan who was mourning a man he hated, who was thrust into a life he was not prepared for and thought he couldn't trust many of the people around him. A Jeonghan who was terrified of opening up.

And for good reason.

"Put your guns down," he continues.

And it's only then that he raises his head.

In the moment their eyes meet, the world seems to stop. Seungcheol hears nothing, feels nothing, sees nothing but Jeonghan. Jeonghan and the hurt marring his features. Jeonghan and the muscles working in his jaw, the way his sweet lips are pressed into a thin line. He's *pale,* hands trembling as he reaches a hand behind him, beneath his coat. He's looking at Seungcheol with such dark, sad eyes, steps slow and calculated as he walks towards him.

And he pulls out his gun.

Seungcheol's heart stops.

He thinks he hears someone, maybe more than one someone, say Jeonghan's name but it's muffled over the blood thrumming in his ears. He thinks he sees

someone try to stop Jeonghan but all he can focus on is the coal-black muzzle of his gun as it comes closer to the center of his forehead. He thinks he feels the hands holding him let go but it means nothing to him with the way Jeonghan looks at him.

Like he's a threat to everything Jeonghan loves.

As if Seungcheol isn't part of that. Or, *wasn't.*

"I was right," Jeonghan whispers, eyes hard, almost black as he regards him. It's been so long since he looked at him like that; and it scares Seungcheol how quickly it returned. "Jaesung never had a good thing to say about you and out of nowhere he wants you to join the gang? What a fucking fool my father was. What a fucking fool *I* am."

The gun shivers in his grasp, long, delicate fingers wrapped tight around the grip.

Seungcheol swallows and looks from the barrel of the pistol to Jeonghan's dark, merciless eyes. Silently, he wills him to listen, wills him to understand. "Please put the gun down, let's talk about this, Hannie - "

"What's there to talk about?" he spits through gritted teeth, and the gun stays where it is. "You've been deceiving me for so long. Fooling me, letting me believe I could trust you, that I could lo…" He trails off as a cruel, sad smirk curls over his lips. It's cold and out of place on a face that showed him so much love just an hour ago. "You had me really fucking fooled, Seungcheol. Especially the last several weeks. They teach you that shit when you join?"

Seungcheol can't help but wince; that Jeonghan could think nothing they shared on Yeongheungdo was real hurts. And he keeps trying to reason with him, even though he knows Jeonghan is lost in his anger. Even though he knows it won't get him anywhere. But it's all he can do. "Jeonghan, please. I've been on your side for weeks. I - I'm in love with you and I - "

"Shut the fuck up," he snarls, and Seungcheol's blood turns to ice at the sound of it, freezing him in place.

“You know I am, Hannie,” he whispers, trying not to watch as the gun starts shaking a bit harder in Jeonghan’s hands. Trying not to watch as tears start slipping down his cheeks. Trying not to break down himself because, above all else, he just needs Jeonghan to know that.

That Seungcheol’s never stopped loving him. Not even for a second.

“You’re lying!” Jeonghan bites out, teeth gritted so hard they look like they might break.

And everything in Seungcheol aches to comfort him. Aches to do whatever it takes to make it better. “No I’m not,” he murmurs, looking Jeonghan straight in his cold, hard eyes. “I love you and I care so much about you, about everyone, about Chan - “

Jeonghan closes the distance between them with a few staggering steps - and then the icy, unforgiving metal of his gun is pressed against Seungcheol’s forehead. Right where Jeonghan’s own forehead has rested. Right where Jeonghan’s given him soft kisses and run his fingers through his hair.

Right where a single shot would end him instantly. Paint the wooden doors with his blood and bones and brain matter.

“Stop fucking lying to me!”

“I’m not,” Seungcheol breathes, sounding as desperate as he feels. As Jeonghan looks, hands trembling violently, tears leaking from his eyes. “I swear I’m not. I’m sorry, Jeonghan, I - “

“Fuck you!” he cries and Seungcheol winces at the venom he catches. “You don’t get to be sorry! Not after what you’ve done.”

He’s silent for a moment then but Seungcheol can hear his heavy breaths, the way he tries to swallow back his sobs. He can hear the others not breathing, can feel every single one of their eyes on him, on them. And he knows they don’t dare step in. They are loyal to Jeonghan to the bitter end.

And then, above the dead silence, Seungcheol hears what he dreads most.

The sharp click of Jeonghan cocking his gun.

The simple action of it presses the muzzle harder into his forehead and Seungcheol swallows past the lump in his throat.

“I should kill you where you stand,” Jeonghan hisses, tears gathering on his lips, dripping down his taut jaw.

And Seungcheol squeezes his eyes shut. Tries to imagine Jeonghan actually pulling the trigger. Executing him in front of his men like the cold, heartless killer Seungcheol thought him to be. It’s befitting of men like Sanghoon and Jaesung. But is it Jeonghan?

“Go ahead,” he whispers as his own tears begin to fall. “Shoot me, Jeonghan.”

For a few quiet, aching moments, moments that feel like separate lifetimes, nothing happens. Seungcheol keeps his eyes closed, facing his imminent death like the coward that he is, listens to Jeonghan’s heavy breathing. It’s oddly comforting in a moment such as this, but he clings to it.

“Fuck!”

It’s a sorrowful sound, cracking on his lips, and Jeonghan pulls back. He takes his gun with him, and only then does Seungcheol allow himself to breathe.

“I trusted you,” Jeonghan whispers brokenly from somewhere nearby. But Seungcheol still doesn’t open his eyes. Can’t face what he’s done. “Fuck, I let you in and I… I loved you. And you knew. You knew it had to end like this. So why did you do it? You knew you would hurt me - “

“I was selfish, and I’m so sorry.” Even though Jeonghan isn’t looking for an apology, even though he’s certain it’ll just stoke his anger, Seungcheol can’t help it. What else can he say? “I shouldn’t have let it happen; I shouldn’t have pursued something with you. But I did and I’m so - “

“Don’t,” he spits. “I don’t wanna fucking hear it, Seungcheol.”

He reaches up a shaking hand to wipe at his own wet cheeks, and then he opens his eyes again. Jeonghan's standing a few feet away, gun still gripped white-knuckled in his tremulous hands. But he's not looking at Seungcheol, who takes a heavy breath.

"If you're gonna kill me," he whispers, "then do it, Jeonghan. I'm sor - "

"I said don't!" He whirls on him again, and this time he can't even hold the gun straight. Its aim bounces but its intent is clear and Seungcheol almost wishes he would do it.

Especially when he speaks his next words, breaking Seungcheol's heart in a way he never thought was possible.

"I hate you. I *hate* you. How could you? Fuck, how could you?"

It steals the breath from his lungs, tears his soul from his very being, and he succumbs to the forces weighing him down; falls to his knees, desperate for - for *anything*. Desperate for death, for a savior, for forgiveness, for punishment. For Jeonghan.

But he knows he doesn't deserve any single part of that.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, voice breaking as he chokes back a sob. "I'm sorry."

There's silence again, silence that stretches for miles, for hours, as Seungcheol cries. He can't hold it in anymore and all of his regret, his love, his sorrow spills out onto his cheeks. It feels insincere, like he shouldn't be sobbing like this, but he can't stop it. And through his tears, he looks up at Jeonghan. There's nothing about him now that comforts, nothing about him that makes Seungcheol feel safe. Nothing in his icy eyes, his severe gaze, his black gun that warms Seungcheol.

His Jeonghan is gone.

And then a voice cuts through, gaining both of their attentions. For a moment, Jeonghan blinks as if he'd forgotten about their audience. And then his gaze

hardens once more.

For it's Joshua who speaks.

Joshua, who has also betrayed him in a way. Joshua, his best friend. Joshua, who's done everything for Jeonghan, without a second thought.

"Jeonghan," he says quietly, evenly. He sounds the way he did down in Daegu when he'd confronted Seungcheol. And he wonders if it's getting to Jeonghan, if it's processing better than raw emotion would. "We can use him still. Jaesung and the NIS don't know he's loyal to us now and - "

"Shut up, Joshua," Jeonghan hisses, fingers twitching around the trigger. "I'll deal with you later."

"You know I'm ri - "

Jeonghan grits his teeth. "I said shut *up!"*

Joshua visibly recoils at the anger tightening Jeonghan's voice. They *all* do, if Seungcheol's peripheral vision is to be trusted. And not a single one of them speaks as they watch Jeonghan fall to his knees too. His gun scatters along the ground, like an afterthought, as a sob tears its way up his throat. He's *broken,* before them all. He's broken, and it's Seungcheol's fault.

Would he take it back if he were given the chance? Would he return every touch, every look, every kiss and soft word and let them be destroyed, forgotten, if it meant Jeonghan wouldn't hurt like this?

It's saved your life, a tiny voice buried in the back of his head reminds him. And it's right; if it hadn't been for this love between them, this trust, this foundation - Jeonghan would've killed him already, or had someone else do it.

But is his life worth the price?

"I can help you," he whispers hoarsely, still on his knees, as Jeonghan's tears begin to subside. "I can help you take Jaesung down. I'll - "

Jeonghan's head snaps up and red, swollen eyes find his. Even though they're less than a meter apart, the distance between them feels like lightyears. "I'm done with you, Seungcheol." And there's nothing in his voice. No anger, no sadness, no emotion at all. He just sounds *exhausted.* "I don't want your help with anything. I don't want you around anymore, don't want to see you anymore. I'm done. You… you mean *nothing* to me now."

His words dig through what's left of Seungcheol's heart like a knife, long and serrated, and it *hurts.*

He can't catch his breath, watching as Jeonghan stands up again.

"We can't let him go back to the NIS," Junhui says somewhere above him, sounding as detached as Jeonghan does. "Not with what he knows."

"And if the others find out you let a traitor go," Jihoon adds, "if *Jaesung* finds out…"

Jaesung.

Fuck.

Jeonghan collects his gun silently and sets it on the table with a sharp metallic thud. Steady hands fix his hair, smooth his clothes, and he turns to his men who await his commands with bated breath.

"Junhui, Mingyu," he says, still without a shred of emotion in his voice. It's scary and Seungcheol can't stand the sound of it. "Take Seungcheol downstairs, to the basement. Show him what we do to traitors."

He remembers Kyuwon, bruised and bleeding. Broken fingers. Splattered against the wall.

His stomach knots.

No.

He's grabbed by a pair of strong hands. They lift him to his weak legs, and he can't look away from Jeonghan, the very picture of steely apathy with his still features. He's not shaking and sobbing and desperate like he was a few minutes ago. No, he's collected himself now; he's come to and locked himself deep inside his mind. Only a few people have ever been able to bring him out of there and three of them stand before him now, traitors.

How could Joshua think this was a good idea?

How could Seungcheol?

"No."

Mingyu's voice is sharp, rebellious, and it catches Jeonghan's dangerous gaze.

"Excuse me?" he asks quietly, as if giving Mingyu a chance to correct himself.

But he doesn't. He stares his leader, his friend, his former lover right in the eyes and stands his ground. "You heard me. I said no. I'm not hurting him."

Hope flares up in Seungcheol again. Hope that maybe some of them will understand. At least in time. Hope that maybe he can make it out of this alive, at least to kill Jaesung with his own hands. Or watch Jeonghan do it.

"Then you're on his side," Jeonghan hisses, and even though Mingyu has a few inches and several pounds on him, Jeonghan looks the more lethal, the more threatening. It's the way his upper lip curls above his teeth. It's the authority he holds as leader. It's the way he has nothing left to lose now. Not really.

"Then I am," Mingyu says evenly. "So are Joshua and Wonwoo if that's the way we're doing things. But I don't see you calling for them to be punished."

"I will deal with them later," he hisses. "And you as well, if you keep this shit up."

But Mingyu doesn't stop. He approaches Jeonghan with slow, careful steps. The way one might approach a feral cat they intend to catch. “I know you’re hurting and I’m sorry. Trust me, I’m not thrilled with him either, knowing what he did to you. To all of us. But I’m not hurting him because I… I trust him when he says he’s on our side, that he’s loyal. I think hurting him and killing him would be a huge mistake. So I won’t do it. And if that makes me a traitor too… then so be it.”

Jeonghan glowers at him, fire in his eyes. “Minghao, go with Junhui,” he snaps, not looking away from Mingyu.

And just like that, any hope Seungcheol held is snuffed out.

“Yes sir,” and then there’s another pair of hands on Seungcheol. They drag him a few feet towards the doors and Seungcheol goes willingly. Fighting won’t get him anywhere, except maybe bleeding out on the carpet. But he’s not giving up. He’s done what he can for now and Jeonghan might hate him, maybe forever, but… but he’s not letting him get hurt. He’s not letting Jaesung win.

He’s not letting Jeonghan die, even though he knows he should. Jeonghan is everything he’s supposed to hate and yet…

He hates Jaesung for using him like this. He hates Jaesung for deceiving them *all,* for what he plans to do. He hates Byungchul and the NIS and the entrenched corruption, the *decay* he’s been ignoring for so long. The corruption and decay that caused his persona to leave.

But this isn’t his life. So he’ll behave, he’ll play nice if it keeps him alive. And then he’ll make sure Jaesung never touches Jeonghan, never hurts anyone again. He’ll make sure Jeonghan and Chan and Joshua and everyone else is safe and sound. And then if he’s allowed to leave with his life, he will. He’ll walk away without a look back and keep their secrets, keep Jeonghan and his selfish love for him in his heart.

But right now he gets one last look before he’s led to his punishment. Jeonghan with red-rimmed eyes, upper lip swollen from crying. Jeonghan with black hair in his eyes, eyes that fall on three of his men without mercy,

and he bites out a sharp, low, *threatening,* "As for you three…" and then the doors close.

Seungcheol stares at them for a long moment and his mind limply tries to process everything that's happened. He's not sure he truly understands the gravity of his situation, but it doesn't matter. Because Jeonghan knows the truth and can keep himself and his men safe now. Jeonghan knows the truth and can wreak his revenge on Jaesung. Jeonghan knows the truth and… and can start moving on. Because there's no coming back from this and Seungcheol knows that.

Anything they had died the moment Seungcheol revealed the truth. Everything they ever shared died in that meeting room, faster than a bullet to the head, and Jeonghan is lost to him now. Jeonghan is his enemy once more.

The way they were always supposed to be.

A few mourning tears roll down his cheeks and he squeezes his eyes shut at them. If there's anyone who doesn't deserve to cry right now, it's him.

"Come on, hyu - " Minghao sighs, and the aborted honorific tugs at his heart. These are his dongsaengs, his little brothers. He's supposed to protect them, keep them safe. Watch out for them, and he *failed* them. Even if they're safe from Jaesung now, Seungcheol failed them because he lost their trust. And that hurts just as much as betraying Jeonghan. "Come on."

"How could you?"

It's worth it it's worth it it's worth it it's worth it

Notes for the Chapter:

I'M SORRY OOF

Chapter 19

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry about my short hiatus from this, everyone! but i wanted to take a couple weeks off and work on some other stuff before things got really bad over here in ephemeral gods. plus this chapter was difficult to write for reasons that will become obvious lmao

got a short (4.5k lmao) one today but BOY is it angsty.

tw: major character injury, brief (non-explicit) torture.

nineteen: a new way to bleed

For almost twenty years, everything Joshua Hong has ever done has been for his best friend. The information he's gathered, the orders he's made on his behalf, the people he's hurt and fought and killed. *Everything* has been for Jeonghan, because Jeonghan saved his life and he's never known how else to return the favor. And not once has Joshua regretted anything. Not a single thing, because it was all for someone else. For someone he loves more than life itself.

Even now, as he faces Jeonghan's icy wrath; even now as he's hid dark secrets from him, Joshua wouldn't take it back. Because it was for *him.*

He stands between Wonwoo and Mingyu, the only one able to look Jeonghan right in his dark, angry eyes. He stands with his back straight and tall, not crumbling beneath Jeonghan's fury because he's staunchly stubborn. Even if it might cost him his position at Jeonghan's side. Even if it might cost him his life.

"How long have you known, Joshua?" Jeonghan bites through gritted teeth.

He can feel everyone's eyes on them. Can feel the way Seokmin watches him with sorrow and love. And he clears his throat before speaking. "I had my suspicions since the beginning but I was able to confirm them in Daegu," he

responds, gaze never leaving Jeonghan's. And he knows it's not what Jeonghan wants to hear, he knows the truth will only serve to make him angrier - but he's done with lying.

He remembers every time Seungcheol would lament about deceiving him, how he didn't want to do it anymore because Jeonghan deserves better. And Joshua gets it, *of course* he does. He might be quiet and brutally honest but he's not without emotion. Keeping this from Jeonghan has been the hardest thing he's ever had to do.

But he needed to do it. And he hopes Jeonghan will understand that.

His eyes flash and he takes a step closer; Joshua does not flinch. "You knew for over a *month*- "

"We couldn't risk you finding out, not with Jaesung against you," he responds, grateful for how clearly he's able to think in stressful situations. Not like Seungcheol, crying and sounding like a broken record with his apologies. It might get him somewhere, his clarity. At least he hopes it will. "He's working with Song Yooseok, and if he figured out you knew his true intentions he'd kill you. Just like he killed Sanghoon. But if we waited, we would have the upper hand. Seungcheol would keep feeding him false information until we were ready to strike too." He sighs, Seungcheol's sorrow from a mere ten minutes ago still weighing on his heart. Jeonghan's too. "He just - he just got too in his head about it before we were ready to tell you."

Something else flashes in Jeonghan's gaze but before Joshua can latch onto it, analyze it, he's already turning his attention to Wonwoo. Wonwoo keeps his head bowed in submission, and Joshua hopes it works out for him.

"You knew too?"

"Yes," he answers quietly. "I helped Shua-hyung get the information he needed. He's had me digging into Seungcheol-hyung for almost two months now, Jaesung since you left Daegu." He bites his lip as he ventures a look up, holding Jeonghan's deadly gaze. "Jaesung's dangerous, hyung. If he finds out you know - "

He grits his teeth with a feral snarl, hands balling into fists at his side. “I’ll kill him myself.”

And this is why we were going to wait to tell him.

But Seungcheol can’t hear his silent chastising, unfortunately.

“How?” Mingyu asks, somehow looking so small for someone so big. But Joshua knows it must’ve hurt him to disobey Jeonghan the way he did. To stand there and watch while the man he loves is hurt by a hyung he treasures too. To stand there and watch as everything falls apart, and protect Seungcheol. Protect the man who hurt his love because he believes him.

They don’t deserve Mingyu. Not a single one of them.

“He’s allied with the second most powerful gang boss in the country,” he continues, and Jeonghan’s features harden at his words. “I imagine he’s got all of the ahjussis on his side too, all of the men with him and Sanghoon when they built this.”

The same men Jeonghan pissed off when he cast them to the side and put his friends in their roles, after his father’s death.

“You don’t stand a chance against him alone,” Mingyu finishes grimly, jaw muscles working beneath his skin.

“I’m not weak,” Jeonghan hisses, trembling in his anger, his heartbreak.

Fuck, it hurt seeing him like this. And Joshua will never forgive himself for being a cause of it.

“No one’s saying you are, hyung,” Mingyu responds and he’s so loving, so pleading in his tone. Losing Jeonghan will break him, it will break *all* of them. “But he’s obviously been planning this for a long time. If you go after him he will kill you and then us.”

Jeonghan’s eyes find the floor and he must know that Mingyu is right. But Jeonghan is nothing if not stubborn, especially when he’s indignant and hurting, so Joshua reaches out with his own words.

“You can’t go after him right now, Jeonghan,” he says quietly, and then Jeonghan’s eyes flick back in his direction. It’s a threatening look and as much as it hurts to see Jeonghan look at him like that he’s not bowing down. He *can’t,* because all of this has been to protect Jeonghan. To keep him alive. And if he goes after Jaesung like this, clouded with anger, what was it all for? “I know you’re hurt and you’re angry - “

A smile, completely devoid of any humor or joy, touches his lips. It’s dark and heartless and absolutely what Joshua deserves, even if it makes him shiver in fear. “Hurt and angry. Is that what I am? I wonder why.” And then that grin is gone, replaced by a scowl that’s just as disturbing. Because even during their worst of fights, Jeonghan has never looked at him like this. “I should put you down there right next to Seungcheol, just like Mingyu suggested. Because you’re as traitorous as he is.”

And then tears begin to form anew in his eyes.

Joshua’s heart breaks, countlessly.

“You knew when we came back from Daegu, didn’t you?” he whispers. “You - you sat there and told me that Seungcheol and I should go to Yeongheungdo? You - you came and ate with us, while you were - you were hiding all this from me? You *knew* what would happen, you knew what this would do to me and you just - “

Tears threaten Joshua’s eyes and throat but he won’t let them come. He doesn’t deserve the release. “I was selfish, just like he was, but… I’d never seen you so happy, Hannie. Fuck, I should’ve told you the moment I found out but I wanted you to have more time with him. I wanted you to realize that… that you could survive this. That you could love and get hurt but it’d be okay. Because it *will.”*

He shakes his head. “You don’t get to make that decision for me. You don’t get to dictate my life like that.”

“We did this to protect you,” Joshua whispers, desperation starting to distort his mind. He can’t lose Jeonghan. Not like this, not to Jaesung. “Seungcheol loves you. I love you. Wonwoo loves you, and Mingyu loves you. We - “

“You still hid things from me and went against me,” he snarls. “You still disobeyed me. I don’t care why you did it; what matters is that you fucking did it in the first place.” With that he stalks towards the doors and grips the handle with white knuckles. Back rigid, not looking at any of them, he whispers, “I will never forgive you.”

“Jeonghan,” Wonwoo says and there’s sorrow in his voice. “Don’t do this. He will *kill* you, hyung, please.”

But Jeonghan’s already gone, and the door slams behind him, echoing in the silence of the room. Body weak, Joshua sinks into the nearest chair. He feels numb, like he’s shutting down. Like he can’t process anything.

Like he’s already dead.

And then, somewhere nearby, there’s a soft whisper that breaks Joshua’s heart more than anything else. More than Seungcheol accepting his fate so quickly, so quietly. More than Jeonghan sobbing and broken before them all. More than knowing he hurt his best friend, maybe beyond repair.

“How could you?”

It’s Seokmin, voice cracking as he no doubt tries to hold his own tears back.

And Joshua can’t bring himself to look at him.

“We had to,” Wonwoo snaps, always so white-hot in his anger. But never at his brothers. *What have we become? What did I do?* “If Jeonghan found out he’d do exactly what he’s doing now - risking fucking everything to take Jaesung on by himself. He’s going to *die* and Jaesung will kill us too. So yes, we kept things from him. But it was necessary.”

“Necessary,” Jihoon scoffs and Joshua can picture him, scornful and small, face twisted up in anger he’s completely right in feeling. “Do you hear yourself? How are you any different than Jaesung? Than Seungcheol? You knew what you were doing - “

Hands come down on the tabletop with a sharp *crack!* and Joshua imagines it's Wonwoo. But he still doesn't look up. Can't bear the sight of his little brothers fighting because of him. "Don't fucking compare me to him," Wonwoo hisses. "I - we - are *nothing* like Jaesung. Seungcheol is nothing like him, and you know it. We did this to protect Jeonghan. Jaesung wants to kill him. Do you see the fucking difference?"

"You still hurt him," Soonyoung snaps, like it's so black and white. "And now he's gonna fucking die because you two - "

"I'm going after him," Vernon suddenly says, and it's this that finally breaks Joshua out of his state of shock.

They're not losing anyone else.

"No you're not," he murmurs as he stands, and the remaining men turn and look at him. Every single one of them. There's varying degrees of outrage and indignation; pain from Wonwoo and Mingyu. Love from Seokmin. And he returns these gazes as best as he can. Because at the end of the day, no matter what he's done, he's still their hyung. They still respect him. And he will never hurt them again, as long as he lives. He'll spend the rest of his days making it up to them. To Jeonghan. "We're calling Daewon and the other branch leaders and getting as many on our side as we can. And then we're going after Jaesung. If we're lucky, the bastard might - might torture Jeonghan before killing him. So we could still get to him alive."

So Joshua gives his orders. Tells Mingyu to gather as many arms as they can from their stockpile. Tells Wonwoo to figure out where Jaesung is. Tells Seungkwan to make sure he's prepared for injuries. Tells them all to show no mercy against the man that deceived them *all* for so long.

"We're at war now," he says. "And we are going to prevail. No matter what."

His words are met by nods and quiet agreements. And with that, one by one, they leave the room. Until Joshua's alone with Seokmin. There's enough physical distance between them to feel hopeless, but the look in Seokmin's eyes is redeeming. It's now that Joshua's facade breaks and he *cries*.

Seokmin, precious and warm and loving, closes the space between them and holds him so tight. He's bright and stable, everything Joshua doesn't deserve. So he clings to it, to Seokmin. Buries his face in him like he can shut out the world like this.

"I know you did what you thought was right," Seokmin whispers, fingers carding through Joshua's hair with more comfort than he's earned, "but… I think you might've messed up, hyung."

Joshua squeezes him gently and lets out a sob. "I-I thought - I-I just… I knew I would hurt him but I - "

"Shh," Seokmin murmurs. "I know. I know, and I'm here, okay?"

Of course he is. "I love you," Joshua breathes and his soul aches at the thought of Seokmin ever leaving him. "Fuck, I love you so much, Seokmin."

"Not as much as I love you."

And somehow? Somehow that hurts more than anything else he's been through today.

The basement is cold and gooseflesh prickles up along Junhui's bare arms. But he pays it no mind as he and Minghao all but manhandle Seungcheol into one of the torture rooms. The door slides shut behind them with a thunderous *clank!* and then Junhui, by himself, shoves Seungcheol into the singular chair in the room while Hao searches for restraints.

And Seungcheol doesn't move a muscle. He hasn't since they left the meeting room. Hasn't uttered a word or made any movements to fight. It's something Junhui can't wrap his head around. Seungcheol knows what he's capable of, knows what awaits him down here. So why is he just… taking it?

Minghao returns from a corner of the room with rope and he gets to work quickly, quietly: binds Seungcheol's wrists and ankles to the chair. And

Seungcheol winces as Hao ties a bit tighter than necessary but he doesn't say anything.

And for a moment, Junhui just looks at him. Tries to find Seungcheol's gaze but it's fixed rather blearily on the red-tinged floor in between them.

"What should we start with?" Minghao asks quietly from beside him, eyes sharp and clear as they take Seungcheol in.

But there's something weighing him down; Junhui can tell. Of *course* he can tell - after spending twenty years with someone you come to know them at least a little bit. Minghao's thin shoulders are tensed, like he might break if Junhui were to put a hand on him. And in all the time they've known each other, he realizes they've never had to deal with anything like this. All the people they've fought and killed and tortured, they've never had to hurt someone they like.

Love, really.

Seungcheol has spent the last eight months time and time again proving himself to be reliable, supportive, kind, easy-going. He's been a quiet, strong presence this entire time, one Junhui has gotten used to. Taken for granted.

All for what? So he could just betray them in the end? Prove their worst fears right?

On their side or not, Jaesung or not, Seungcheol still knew what he was doing. He still laughed with them and paid for meals and - and *comforted* them. He still *loved* them like brothers and that's what hurts the most.

Anger races through Junhui's veins like fire and he balls his hands into fists.

"Do - do you want me to…?" Minghao asks, sounding uncertain.

But that's the thing about it: as much as Hao's been through, as strong and capable he is, as much as Junhui adores him - he isn't always tough. He still struggles with turning off that part of him. The part that feels empathy.

Junhui though? He doesn't. He learned long ago how to dissociate and get the job done.

Something about him Seungcheol will learn now, if he hasn't already.

"No," he bites out. "Let me take care of him, Hao."

Something cognizant flashes across Seungcheol's face, like he knows just what Junhui has in store for him. But that's it. Nothing about him jumps or tenses, gets ready to fight. Nothing about him shows any fear.

He just slumps back against the chair. Like he's already defeated.

It just serves to piss Junhui off more.

His first punch lands square in the middle of Seungcheol's face and he feels more than hears the cartilage in his nose breaking beneath his knuckles. It's satisfying; the groan Seungcheol makes behind taut lips is satisfying. The sharp pain lacing up his own arm is satisfying. But it's not enough. Not nearly.

Not after what Seungcheol's done to him, to them. To Jeonghan, the man to whom Junhui owes his very life.

So he throws a second punch. And then a third. And then a fourth. Soon he loses count, just focusing on this. On punishing. On *revenge.* Each hit is punctuated with a deep groan from Seungcheol's throat; skin splitting and sometimes bones cracking beneath Junhui's fists. But none of it's enough. Fuck, the more, the harder he punches the angrier he gets. The more he wants to see the breath leaving Seungcheol's body because he's a *traitor* and that's what they do to traitors.

And then Seungcheol lifts his head. Slowly, gingerly, biting back a wince.

He looks up at Junhui passively, almost absently - through blackened, swollen eyes, nose jutting to the side in a way it isn't made to, blood forming rivulets on his face - and it breaks through Junhui's resolve. He's never met a man who accepted his fate so easily before. No, usually they fight and rail

and scream. Beg for mercy. But not Seungcheol. And Junhui doesn't fucking *get it*. Seungcheol *should* be fighting. Yet he's not. He's sitting calmly, taking every hit like the world's warmest, fleshiest punching bag. Not talking back, not pleading with Junhui to stop.

It's like he thinks he deserves it.

And he *does*.

"I should kill you," Junhui snaps, knuckles aching, cracked, bleeding. And if Seungcheol registers his words he doesn't show it. Just gives Junhui that blank stare. It's infuriating. "You shouldn't be allowed to live, after what you've done."

"Junnie," Minghao says softly, sounding and feeling like an afterthought. But there's no room for him here, in Junhui's rage. There never has been.

Seungcheol parts his split, bloodied lips to speak but all that comes out at first is a choked grunt. And then he breathes, ragged and hoarse and wheezing, "Do it. I know I deserve it."

Even broken and beaten down, even as close to death as he is, Seungcheol is still selfless. A good person. He's better than all of them, always has been, even at his worst.

Hands aching but stone-still, Junhui crosses the room to a table in the corner, where all of his favorite toys sit clean and untouched. A knife at the end, sharp and shining, calls to him and he grabs the handle. It's all but weightless in his hands yet it holds the immeasurable power to hurt, to kill. To take what can't be given as easily. Junhui simply wields such power. He turns around and catches Minghao's sad eyes. They watch him closely as he makes his way back to the center of the room, but he doesn't say anything.

He's learned not to over the last twenty years.

Seungcheol glances almost carelessly at the knife when he sees it and then back up at Junhui.

“Go ahead,” he says, like Junhui’s waiting for his permission.

He turns the grip in his hand, watching the blade catch the light -

And then the door opens like thunder in the silent room.

“Hyung!”

Before Junhui can register the voice the knife is tugged from his hand and he whirls around to see Mingyu - *Mingyu?* - holding it in his own. “Just what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he bites out, remembering how easily and clearly Mingyu had disobeyed Jeonghan in front of them all. The memory sends a fresh stab of anger through his system, licking through him like flames, and he grits his teeth. There’s no going back now, he can’t *stop*. There’s no place in this gang, this family for traitors. And Mingyu knows that. “Come to take your place in line?”

“Stop,” Mingyu says, and he drops the knife. It clatters to the floor sharply. “That’s enough, hyung.”

A bitter laugh escapes Junhui’s lips. “You’re just full of it today, aren’t you Mingyu? Now back off or you’re next.”

“Listen to him, Gyu,” Minghao murmurs, eyes soft and entreating, begging his best friend to shut up and stay away. “Just - this is what Seungcheol deserves.”

“I know,” Mingyu bites out. “But we need him.”

Junhui can’t see much else besides red so he steps towards Mingyu. There’s nothing on his mind, in his heart or soul besides rage. Violence. And Mingyu’s coming down here thinking he can tell him what to do? Thinking he can tell him how to deal with a traitor when Junhui is well-versed in such matters? “You’ve chosen your side,” he hisses, “so has Seungcheol, and so have I.”

“S-stop.”

It's a broken croak, and Junhui barely registers it as Seungcheol's voice. But he ignores him.

"Don't kill him, hyung," Mingyu asks quietly. "Please. We - Jeonghan's - I… we need him. We-we think Jeonghan's gone after Jaesung and…"

Tears spring to his eyes, tightening his voice, and for a moment he looks like the kid Junhui met for the first time years ago. He was fifteen back then, if Junhui remembers correctly, too tall and lanky for his tiny hands, yet he was already a master with a gun. With his fists. But the way he looked at everything - the way he looked at Jeonghan - was so pure, full of awe. Child-like in some ways. Mingyu needed no protecting, he never has, but he inspires that desire in others. It's his silly giggles, how sometimes he seems so utterly dumb one can't help but wonder how he's gotten this far in life. It's how much he cares for those around him, how wholly he loves.

"What makes you think Seungcheol knows where he is?" Junhui asks, hearing the way his voice has softened. And he tries to keep the panic at bay, the panic over Jeonghan attempting to go after Jaesung totally alone. And what that means.

"I don't know," Mingyu whispers and a tear slips down his cheek. "But I ca - *we* can't lose Jeonghan."

"I know."

So Junhui turns around. And the look on Seungcheol's face pierces through his soul. Beneath the cuts and bruises and blood, for the first time since they came down here, Junhui sees emotion. Pain, remorse, sorrow. It all flickers across his face amongst the damage done. For the first time since leaving Jeonghan, Seungcheol looks alive.

Hopeless.

"He'll die," he winces in a rough, tearful voice, tinged with fear. "I - he'll *die,* we-we can't - "

“That’s why we need you, hyung,” Mingyu murmurs. “Do you know anything, where Jaesung might be?”

For a moment his eyes dart around as he thinks, and then he sighs. “No. But Jeonghan doesn’t - “

“He could call him,” Minghao says quietly. “Since he’s the one Jaesung wants. And if Jaesung told him to meet somewhere…”

“What did Joshua say to do?” Junhui asks. Traitorous as Joshua is, he’s Jeonghan’s right hand man for a reason.

And… and maybe he wasn’t… completely wrong in his intentions.

Maybe.

“T-to call Daewon and the others and-and… I don’t know, hyung, I just - we can’t lose him.”

The desperation clinging to Mingyu’s voice, his features, threatens to take over them all and Junhui sighs heavily, knuckles aching with even the tiniest of movements. “All right, Gyu, it’s okay.” And he pulls the younger, taller man into a tight hug.

Mingyu breaks, sobbing like a child in his arms, and it’s enough to soften most of the rage he feels. There’s so much they all need to work through, so much to process and talk about, but now isn’t the time. Now is when they need each other the most and Junhui would hate himself for the rest of his life if he hurt any of his brothers. Regret already rises up like bile in his throat as he remembers the way he spoke to Mingyu a few minutes ago, a product of his fury and desperation.

How deeply had Seungcheol burrowed into their lives that he affected them like this?

When Mingyu’s tears subside Junhui pulls away and touches his cheek. “Chin up, Gyu. We have a job to do, okay? Jeonghan-hyung needs you.”

He nods quietly with watery eyes, and glances behind Junhui. “What about Seungcheol-hyung?”

Junhui could be cold. He could tap into that side of him again, but he hates doing that. Hates what it does to him. And deep down, he knows who he’s truly angry with. Who truly deserves the worst of his ire and violence.

“We’ll leave him here,” he says quietly. “Seungkwan can tend to him if he wants but we won’t order it. And if he ends up as any help to us we’ll go from there.”

Mingyu nods once again and with that he leaves.

“Junhui.”

He turns at the cracked sound that is his name on Seungcheol’s tongue and looks at the man before him. Truly he is pitiful, a broken shell of the man they know. Traitor yes, but… but a victim the same as them. Caught up in a war where his only connection is the history of his family name. For a moment Junhui puts himself in Seungcheol’s place. Falling hopelessly in love with someone he can never truly have. Knowing he will break that person’s heart. Finding out his uncle - someone he thought he could trust - isn’t who he thought he was.

The irony is almost laughable.

Their eyes meet, Seungcheol’s teary and blackened.

“You can’t let him die,” he whispers brokenly. “I told him everything to save his life and… and I know he isn’t mine to lose but… *please.”*

“You really love him, don’t you?”

Seungcheol’s response is a hollow sob, one that wracks his whole body, and Junhui can’t watch him fall apart twice in a day. So he takes Minghao’s hand and they leave, the door locking behind them.

Outside in the dim light of the basement, the world feels different. Quieter. Less intense. Goosebumps break out on his arms again and Minghao

squeezes his aching hand.

"Don't, my love," Junhui had whispered to him in Mandarin, what seems like an eternity ago. Wrapped his fingers around Minghao's, long and delicate, and pried the knife from his grasp. Because just like Mingyu, Junhui has always wanted to protect him. And it's been fairly easy: no external force has ever stood a chance against Junhui and the way he feels about Minghao. But it's been hardest to protect Minghao from himself. And Junhui knows him better than anything else. Knows that if Minghao had hurt Seungcheol he would've regretted it.

"Come on," Minghao says quietly, stroking a gentle thumb over his damaged knuckles. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Notes for the Chapter:

oof.

Chapter 20

Notes for the Chapter:

tw: brief, sort of panic attack(s), brief gun violence, abduction.

yeah. oof.

twenty: love and war

When Chan steps out of the university building, there's a familiar man leaning against a black, expensive car. He's tall and lanky, and in his matching, monochromatic attire, the man looks so out of place amongst the college students shuffling to their own vehicles. He watches them through dark sunglasses even though the sun hasn't been shining all day, brushing pieces of black hair out of the way. For a moment, Chan just stays where he is near the doors, jostled by students coming and going, but he's rooted to the spot. Something's wrong, he knows there is. There has to be, with how rigid Wonwoo's form is. Even from a few meters away Chan can tell.

So he begins to worry. What if his hyungs didn't make it back okay? Jeonghan had texted him that they were leaving Yeongheungdo when he was already in class so he… he didn't see them this morning and -

The moment Wonwoo notices him though, his shoulders drop a bit. He relaxes. And he crosses the parking lot between them with quick, purposeful steps. Greets Chan with the softest of kisses that would usually make his insides melt. But not right now, not with the weird, anxious air around him. Not with the way he avoids Chan's gaze, even as he takes off his sunglasses.

"What's wrong, hyung?" Chan asks against his lips, a shiver rippling through his body as Wonwoo's thumb strokes over his cheekbone. But he blames it on the chilly wind, leftover from the rainstorm this morning. On how icy Wonwoo's eyes are. "Is everything okay?"

"No," he murmurs. "We need to talk, love."

“About what?”

But Wonwoo doesn’t say a word; he just wraps gentle arms around his waist and leans down to bury his face in Chan’s neck. For a moment, Chan’s sort of stunned into silence. It’s not that he doesn’t treasure every touch from his boyfriend, and it’s not that Wonwoo doesn’t ever engage in displays of affection like this with him but… God, this feels weird. Foreboding. Like whatever Wonwoo has to say, Chan won’t want to hear it. Because obviously he needs this. Needs to be held. Which means something - something not good is going down.

What else should I expect? My boyfriend is *in my brother’s gang, after all.*

So he reaches up and gently winds fingers through Wonwoo’s soft hair. Wraps his free arm around him, leans his cheek against his head. And by now most of the students around them have cleared out so Chan can just pretend they’re the only two people in the world.

“Do you wanna go to our spot?” he asks quietly, playing with the hairs at the nape of Wonwoo’s neck.

He grins against Chan’s skin and then slowly lifts his head. But by the time their eyes meet the smile is gone, replaced by something cold and business-like. It sends a new pang of anxiety through Chan’s body, kickstarting his heart. Wonwoo’s never looked at him like that. Not once. “No. We should probably head home. There’s… it’s a lot. And I don’t want to tell you in public.”

“Wonnie,” he whispers, and his heart sounds so loud in the short distance between them, “you’re scaring me.”

“Honestly? I’m scared too.” He pulls away and reaches for Chan’s hand. “Come on.”

The drive home is done in silence, with one of Wonwoo’s hands on his knee the entire time. And Chan’s in his head, trying desperately to figure out what

happened. What in the world could someone like Jeon Wonwoo be afraid of? And - and why hasn't he heard from his hyung all day? God, he can't force the questions he wants to ask out of his mouth, can't even look at Wonwoo because the tension in his boyfriend's body is making him feel like he'll lose his mind.

In the twelve or so years they've known each other, Chan has never seen Wonwoo so stressed out. No, Wonwoo's always been one of his most sturdy hyungs. As far as Chan has been able to tell, he never lets anxiety or fear get to him. And that's one reason why he's been one of Chan's favorite hyungs. So whatever's going on - it must be bad. Really, really bad.

Wonwoo carries his backpack up to the apartment. Locks the door behind them. And it's dark in here, just the way Chan left it this morning - except for the few bags strewn across the living room, like they'd be sorted through and put away later.

So Jeonghan and Seungcheol made it back okay.

What else could be wrong then?

"Hyung," he says quietly as he turns back towards Wonwoo, meeting his eyes in the darkness. "Please talk to me. What happened?"

Wonwoo sighs and motions to the couch. Chan sits as Wonwoo flicks on one of the lamps, dousing the room in soft, warm light. And then he's sitting beside Chan, reaching for his hand like it grounds him. The way he's grounded Chan as long as he's known him.

"I love you," Wonwoo whispers.

Even though they've only been saying it for maybe two weeks now, it still makes Chan's heart soar. But not tonight. No, tonight the words sound tainted. Like a precursor to something dark. Like it might hurt him.

"I love you too," he whispers back anyway, squeezing Wonwoo's hand. "You're not… I mean, you're not breaking up with me are you?"

It won't hurt to get the most obvious one out of the way, right?

And, surprising him, Wonwoo smiles. It's just a soft stretch of his lips but it's a smile nonetheless. "Hardly. I'd be an idiot to break up with you, love."

That actually lifts his spirits a bit, settles some of the anxiety rising in his body. "Oh. Good."

"But… well… you might… you might want to end things after what I tell you."

And the anxiety returns, stealing the breath from his body. "Wonnie…"

"I'll - I'll just get into it, okay? But please remember that I - that I love you, and I love hyung and I just was doing what I thought was right, okay?"

Chan nods, a strange, unwelcome lump forming in his throat at Jeonghan's mention. *That can't be good.* "What did you do?"

Wonwoo sighs heavily and rubs his face with his free hand. It's only then that Chan notices the bags under his eyes. The way his hands shake just a bit. And if he didn't know any better he might blame that on his tremors but… but this feels different.

"So I… I've been keeping things from you, love," he whispers, looking at the pile of suitcases and bags on the floor before them. "Honestly, I struggled with it. Originally I wasn't gonna say a damn thing because it's gang business and I don't want to involve you in that but… but now things have turned out a lot worse than I thought they would and…"

"Tell me," Chan all but begs, even though something in the back of his mind screams at him to not. "I'm - I'm not a child anymore. I need to know these things."

"I know." He lifts his head and meets Chan's gaze, and Chan doesn't like what he sees there. It worries him. "Seungcheol-hyung isn't who you think he is. He isn't who any of us thought he was. Neither… neither is Jaesung."

“What does that mean?” Chan whispers.

“It means Seungcheol’s been undercover with the NIS this whole time and… and Jaesung is an informant for the NIS, too.”

The words make no sense. They just - they *don’t.* And Chan knows it’s because he’s young, because he’s naive to these sorts of things. Because as much as he claims to not be a child anymore, he knows absolutely nothing about this gang stuff. And it just… it makes no sense. He knows Seungcheol, loves him. He… Seungcheol was there for him when Jeonghan was in prison. He supported him, encouraged him, worked with him on homework and played Mario Kart with him and -

“Does… does hyung know?” he whispers, pretty certain he already knows the answer.

Wonwoo nods once.

And Chan’s heart breaks, filling him with an aching emptiness for his hyung.

“Oh God,” he breathes, feeling Wonwoo’s thumb stroking his knuckles. “God, he - he must be so hurt. I can’t even - Seungcheol… he - he really…?”

“That’s where it gets complicated.” He sighs once more. “He was put here - by Jaesung, technically - to gather information for him so Jaesung could… could kill Sanghoon and Jeonghan, and then take over.”

Chan’s head is already beginning to spin and he knows this can’t be everything Wonwoo needs to tell him. Though it’s already so much – too much – to process. God, how does that make any sense? Jaesung’s been in his life since he was born. Fuck, he was the one who - who’d found Chan after their mother had… And he’d held Chan so tight. Let him bury his face in his shoulder and cry like a baby even though he was eleven years old.

How could he want to kill his best friend? And his nephew, for all intents and purposes?

Chan’s stomach churns.

“But Seungcheol fell in love with Jeonghan and came to see the rest of us as little brothers,” Wonwoo continues quietly, “so he stopped giving Jaesung and his section chief the information they wanted. And then Shua-hyung figured it out and… and he and I have been working with Seungcheol to take Jaesung down before he can carry out his plans.”

“So wait,” Chan says without really thinking, mostly because his brain has kind of shut off for the moment. “Seungcheol-hyung has been undercover this whole time. But he’s on our side now?”

Wonwoo nods patiently.

“But Jaesung-hyu - uh…”

“It’s okay,” he murmurs. “It was jarring to all of us too, to say the least.”

Chan sighs heavily, shaking his head in a vain attempt to clear it. “He’s been working against the gang for a while? Because he wants to take over? And - and he killed abeoji?”

“Yes, yes, and sort of. He worked with a rival gang leader as well as one of our drug runners. But he was behind it. And now he’s got his sights set on Jeonghan.”

“But hyung knows now, right? Which - which is good?”

Wonwoo smirks but it’s flat, emotionless. “That’s why I wanted to tell you. Chan…” He sighs and takes Chan’s other hand in his, squeezing them both tightly. And his anxiety spikes even more. “After Seungcheol told everyone else Jeonghan… Jeonghan left. He - we think he might be going after Jaesung.”

“Alone?” Chan’s voice breaks and he pulls away from Wonwoo. Gets up from the couch. Everything in his body itches to do something, to help, to - to… God, he doesn’t even know. Can’t make sense of all of this. Can’t process any of it because it doesn’t make sense. “We - we have to do something, Wonwoo, we can’t just - “

“Channie,” he murmurs. “Come here please, love.”

“He - he could die - fuck, what the *fuck?* What the fuck…”

A pair of strong, thin arms wrap around him and Chan turns to bury his face in Wonwoo’s chest as his tears finally bubble over. He feels… desperate. Aching. Hurt. Scared. Above everything else Chan is *scared* out of his mind. None of this makes any sense and it’s so much to take in at once but… but Wonwoo’s here. Tough, warm Wonwoo. Wonwoo, who’s been one of Chan’s many rocks over the years. Wonwoo, who would never let anything bad happen to him. Wonwoo, with his long fingers curling through Chan’s hair, his deep, comforting breaths.

“I won’t lie and say everything is going to be okay,” he whispers, “but we’re doing our best. We… we’re going to war, love. We’re going to take Jaesung down and try to save Jeonghan. But it might… it might be bad.”

“I don’t wanna lose you,” he whines through a sob, knowing how childish that is. Wonwoo can’t control that; he’s in a gang, for God’s sake. It comes with the territory. “I don’t - I don’t want to lose any of you.”

“I know, love. I know.” He lifts Chan’s face closer to his and leans down for a soft kiss.

Chan immediately deepens it, all the hopelessness in his body needing a point of release, needing a distraction, and presses even closer as Wonwoo’s tongue curls against his. But his hands stay gentle, loving as they cup Chan’s face and soon they break the kiss with heavy breaths.

“Stay here with me,” Chan whispers, though asking that is selfish, he knows. “Please.”

“I will,” Wonwoo murmurs. “I just - I need to get my things and then I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Let me go with you.”

He shakes his head. “No. It’s - it’s dangerous. Just - I’ll be back as soon as I can, love, I promise.”

They share a kiss, this one just as desperate as the one before, and then Wonwoo’s pulling away too quickly. He murmurs an “I’ll be back” before the door closes behind him, leaving Chan alone, scared, and cold.

Never in his life has Seungcheol felt so utterly alone.

As soon as Junhui and Minghao left he’d broken down. Sobbed and sobbed until he couldn’t anymore. Until the pain in his face was too much and he just wanted to curl in on himself and shut out the world. The guilt, the self-hatred, the desire to simply stop existing was almost too much; it left him feeling choked. Like he’s drowning. And he couldn’t stop replaying the look on Junhui’s face. On Minghao’s. On Mingyu’s. Knowing - knowing he made them fight like that. Knowing he was responsible for these men, these brothers, saying what they had to each other.

It all haunts him, every waking moment.

So now he sits in harsh white light, waiting. Waiting for what, he’s not sure. Just… something. Junhui to come back and finish the job. Someone telling him Jeonghan’s dead. Or Jaesung to walk through that door. He’s not sure what would be worse.

Well. Actually he is. Without a doubt. And he’s not sure he could survive that.

As if on cue, the door does open with a heavy clank, and a young, hard face meets Seungcheol’s gaze through the bright, clinical light.

It’s not Junhui or Jaesung.

It’s not Jeonghan or even Joshua.

It’s Seungkwan.

Carrying a bag, one Seungcheol has come to recognize as the one he keeps his medical tools in, he strolls right in. And at first he doesn't even really look at Seungcheol. Just kneels in front of him and begins untying his wrists. Immediately the pressure lets up and Seungcheol fights the urge to rub at and stretch them. He just sits still, partially in shock. Wondering why this is happening.

"They told me I could come and patch you up," Seungkwan says quietly, as if reading his mind. "I have nothing else to do so…"

There's something soft in his gaze though, something warm in his deft fingers as he works Seungcheol free. Once again hope surges through Seungcheol's body. It's hope he doesn't deserve but still he holds onto it. And it mixes almost dizzyingly with relief because he knows Seungkwan won't hurt him. So around a dry, parched throat and burning, split lips he croaks, "Have - have any of you heard from Jeonghan?"

Seungkwan sighs as he rifles through his bag, and its unseen contents clink. "No. They all think he's after Jaesung but I… I don't think so. I don't know, he's smarter than that isn't he? I mean I know he's hurt and upset but… well, he wouldn't just throw his life away like that, right?"

Seungcheol sighs too. "I hope not," he murmurs.

He glances at Seungcheol with a cocked brow but says nothing as he produces a pair of gloves, pulling them onto his hands. "You're not just saying that, are you?"

"No," Seungcheol says quietly. "I mean it."

"Hmm." He pulls out a small package of what look to be wipes and tugs one free. "This'll probably sting. Hyung really did a number on you."

Honestly, at this point - because who knows how long he's been down here? - the throbbing beneath Seungcheol's skin had all but faded to the background. But now as Seungkwan gently dabs at his wounds the stinging pain comes back with a vengeance and he groans through gritted teeth. "How - how bad is it?" he manages.

Seungkwan sighs. “Well both your eyes are blackened; nose is definitely broken. Other than that I’d probably need x-rays to really see the full damage. Right now I’m honestly just trying to clean the blood away - it’s a little bit scary to look at you like this.”

It could’ve been worse, and really a part of Seungcheol is grateful Junhui stopped when he did.

Rather, that Mingyu stepped in.

“Why’d you come down here, Seungkwan?”

He shrugs, discarding the wipe on the floor as he reaches for another one. “I told you, I was bored. And… well… fuck. Maybe I kind of believe you. But don’t read too much into it, okay? It just…” Another sigh escapes his lips and he sits back on his heels. Meets Seungcheol’s gaze with big, brown eyes that make him look a lot younger than he is and sometimes Seungcheol forgets that he’s only been in this life for a few years. “I was thinking about it. If - if Vernon and I had been in yours and hyung’s shoes and I just… I get why you did what you did. If I had been you and Nonie had been hyung… I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from falling for him. And I would’ve - I would’ve wanted to tell him. That doesn’t excuse what you did to hyung, to-to the rest of us, but… I get it.”

He blames the sleep deprivation, the high intensity of his emotions all day, the burning, throbbing pain embedded in his face - but he starts crying again. And this time he brings his newly freed hands up to bury his face in them.

“Come on, hyung,” Seungkwan tsks quietly. “I’m not done, okay?”

Seungcheol just shakes his head. “I - I… I messed up so badly. And n-now I’m down here and Hannie is off God knows where and Jaesung is gonna find out and - “

“Don’t worry about that, hyung. Really. We’ve got it figured out. Daewon’s on his way - so are the other branches - and we’re looking for Jeonghan and… really, it’s gonna be okay. Jaesung doesn’t stand a chance against us.”

Usually Seungkwan's infectious optimism, his kind, witty personality is comforting. But now it just seems desperate, scared. Like he's trying to convince himself more than Seungcheol.

At least he's trying. You don't even deserve that.

So Seungcheol dries his tears, takes deep breaths to calm down. And Seungkwan waits patiently, still clutching a wipe in his hands. "How - how long until the others get here?"

"A few hours," he responds as he gets back to work, dabbing gently at the skin beneath Seungcheol's nose, where there's no doubt a decent amount of dried, caked blood. Seungcheol tries not to pay attention to the fact that the wipe is coming back a gross brownish-red color. "They have to mobilize and all that but they'll be here soon. And… and Wonwoo-hyung said he was able to find CCTV footage of Jeonghan's car heading out to Hwaseong, he thinks, but that he lost him around Uiwang. So that could be where Jaesung is."

"Jeonghan grew up in Hwaseong," Seungcheol says quietly.

Seungkwan nods. "Shua-hyung's going out there by himself to gather intelligence, I guess. Said he wants to do it alone. I don't know, I guess he's hoping he finds Jeonghan before he finds Jaesung. Or whatever it is he's looking for."

After that they fall into silence. Seungkwan digs through his bag again and pulls out some bandages. And with quick, skilled fingers he sticks them where Seungcheol must need them most. Already he feels a bit better. His face still aches (there's probably something cracked under there) but… but the tightness in his chest has lessened a bit. A part of him holds onto the hope that maybe Jeonghan isn't after Jaesung; that for whatever reason he's headed back to his childhood home.

Maybe to escape.

To think.

Because when it comes down to it, Seungkwan is right. Jeonghan's smart. Even upset, he wouldn't throw his life away like that. He just… he just hopes Jaesung doesn't find him.

With a soft sigh, Seungkwan stands up and gives Seungcheol a gentle smile. "All done. After - after all of this, you'll want to go to a hospital and get an x-ray but…"

If I even make it that far.

"Thank you," Seungcheol whispers truthfully. "I - I mean it, thank you. I don't… I don't deserve your compassion, Kwannie."

"You're not a bad man, hyung," Seungkwan says quietly, sincerity shining in his eyes. "You just - you just made some… questionable decisions. But I know you'll be able to make it right eventually."

Seungcheol sighs heavily. "I hope so."

Seungkwan opens his mouth but before he can speak the door opens again. In walk two older men dressed in black - Seungcheol vaguely recognizes them. But he doesn't have time to process who they might be because in the same moment they enter the room, a silenced gunshot cuts through the quiet and Seungkwan's on the floor with a muted *whumpf!*

Static settles in Seungcheol's mind.

He has nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. No strength to fight back.

Who *are* these men, and why are they here?

Fuck, they just – Seungkwan -

"You messed up, kid," one of the men says with a dangerous grin, one that sends shivers through Seungcheol's body. "And Jaesung wants to see you."

Fuck.

Fuck.

The other man approaches, steps over Seungkwan's form - and for a moment Seungcheol just watches the slow, shallow rise and fall of his body. At least he's still breathing.

It's the last thing he remembers thinking before everything goes black.

By the time Wonwoo gets back to headquarters, most of the inhabitants have taken over the upper floor, planning for battle. It's nearing nightfall but Wonwoo imagines most of them will be working well into the night. And so will he, just with a (hopefully) sleeping Chan at his side. Sighing, he enters his office and greets Seokmin with a nod.

"I thought you were staying with Channie tonight, hyung," he says quietly as he types something on his laptop.

"I am. Just came here to grab some things."

"Gotcha." He groans quietly as he stretches his arms above his head. "So if we need you, you'll be there?"

Wonwoo nods as he makes his way to his own desk. "Call me as soon as Daewon and the others get here - I'll be right over." He pulls his flash drive from his pocket and plugs it into his PC's tower. A few clicks later and he's copying all of that afternoon's research and intelligence onto the tiny stick. From there he'll take it back home and keep going. Keep hunting down Jeonghan and Jaesung. Keep -

Something catches his eye on the other PC, the one that filters through the CCTV cameras they're plugged into. And he watches for a few moments. The footage from downstairs keeps… keeps flickering. Like it's on a loop. The basement, too.

"Hmm."

"What is it, hyung?"

He sighs a bit, eyes narrowing as he focuses on one camera in particular. There's nothing on the screen, just a single chair in the middle of the room. The room where Seungcheol's supposed to be.

Supposed to being the key phrase.

"It - it looks like… *fuck."* And before Seokmin can even say anything Wonwoo's heading for the elevator at the end of the hall. Panic tingles in his fingers as he grips the gun in his belt. There's no way someone could've gotten through his system.

Well, actually… there is *one* person. The one who taught him how to put said systems in place. Who's probably working alongside Jaesung since… since Jeonghan replaced him the moment he came to power, *fuck.* The ahjussi who taught Wonwoo almost everything he knows.

Five agonizingly slow minutes later, Wonwoo steps out from the elevator into the basement. Not a soul is down here - which isn't out of the ordinary, but tonight it feels foreboding. Like there's *supposed* to be someone down here but they're gone.

Like Seungcheol.

Fuck.

He tugs his gun out and takes off the safety, wraps a finger around the trigger. Takes slow, careful steps as he investigates.

One of the torture room doors is wide open and in the light, Wonwoo sees a figure on the floor. So he approaches. The man has a bleeding bullet hole in a very familiar sweater - young face pressed to the cold tile -

"Seungkwan," Wonwoo gets out, dropping to his knees beside him as the breath leaves his body.

Mingyu had said something about him going down to patch Seungcheol up -

Fuck.

Where's Seungcheol?

Gun clattering to the ground, Wonwoo reaches for his phone with shaking hands. Dials the first number he can see. "Junnie," he manages without preamble, the moment the other man picks up. "Get down here. Basement. There's - I don't - "

"Breathe and try again," Junhui says quietly but there's rustling on his end. Like he's moving quickly.

"S-someone fucked with my system. I think it was Beomseok but I don't - "

"Wait, the ahjussi who - "

"Yeah," Wonwoo breathes, and with his other hand he feels beneath Seungkwan's jaw for a pulse. It's there. Faint, but still there. "The cameras - Kwan's been shot - "

"The fuck?"

" - and Seungcheol's gone."

"I'll be right there." And with that, he hangs up.

Hands shaking still, Wonwoo dials another number. His most contacted one. And there's no *click;* Jeonghan doesn't pick up. Not that Wonwoo thought he would but… So he leaves a message. "I don't know where you are, hyung," he whispers, trying not to cry, "but we need you. *Please.* Please just - we need you. Come back."

He hangs up and slides his phone back into his pocket so he can try and stop Seungkwan's bleeding.

The darker it gets, the more worried Chan becomes. Because Wonwoo *still* isn't back. Three hours after he said he'd be, he's still not here. And that's hardly good for Chan's anxiety. Fuck, he hasn't been able to eat or - or focus on anything but their conversation. To the point where he's close to tears

again, digging his nails into the heels of his hands to keep from crying. Spiraling. He needs to be strong right now but… but how can he when everything feels like it's falling apart?

It doesn't help that Wonwoo isn't answering his phone either. None of them are, actually, and for the second time in a single night, Chan feels alone.

And then he hears the gentle beeping of the apartment code as it's typed in.

"Wonnie?" he asks as he stands from the couch, as the front door opens.

But it's not Wonwoo. Two unfamiliar men dressed in black meet his gaze instead, looking as hard and scary as every gangster Chan's ever seen on TV. Because, with the exception of his family and hyungs, he's never seen one before.

Shit.

He runs. Panic and fear course through his veins and he dashes down the hall, towards Jeonghan's room where he knows he has at least one gun stashed. Fuck, he doesn't even know how to use it but - but he has to do something.

These men are obviously here for him.

But why, he doesn't know.

And he's not about to stop and ask.

He shuts and locks the door behind him, rifles through Jeonghan's bedside table until he finds what he's looking for. It's a small handgun, yet it still feels heavy in Chan's shaky, inexperienced hands.

A pounding on the bedroom door wrenches the gun from his grasp and he lets out a gasp as he bends down for it. Tears cloud his eyes and his mind, blood and terror thunder through his body - he remembers this feeling from so long ago -

Holed up in his bedroom closet, listening to the sounds of fighting, struggling from downstairs. Gunshots. Jeonghan crying. How Chan had sobbed and screamed for his hyung -

He reaches for his phone now, with shuddering hands. Finds Jeonghan's contact as the pounding against the door continues. Fuck they're probably trying to break it down fuck answer the phone Jeonghan answer the goddamn phone -

"Channie?"

Relief swells in his chest, breaks into sobs. "Hy-hyung, please come home - there's - someone's here - "

He can't help it; he shrieks when the door gives under the pressure put on it and he drops his phone and the gun again.

The men advance into the room.

He hears Jeonghan's voice crackling over the line. Saying his name.

Chan reaches for the gun once more, can't grip it with how sweaty, how shaky his hands are.

Wills Wonwoo to come home like he said he would.

Faces the intruders with as much courage as he can muster, tears streaming down his cheeks.

One of them scoffs. "I didn't think Sanghoon's kid would cry this much."

And then he's grabbed by rough hands. He fights against them, kicks and yells and punches, but none of them land. He's just gripped tighter as a white cloth is pressed to his nose and mouth.

The last thing he hears before the world goes black is Jeonghan swearing to tear these men apart.

Telling Chan to hold on.

Jaesung isn't usually one to celebrate prematurely, but really the day's events just call for a triumphant drink. So he sits back in his chair in the middle of their warehouse on Gyodongdo Island and pours himself a shot of soju from the bottle on his desk. Around him, his men bustle about, cementing last minute plans. They work quietly, efficiently - from years of experience. Not like Jeonghan's men, letting their cameras and computer systems be hacked so easily.

With a satisfied sigh, Jaesung swallows the shot and it burns so smoothly down his throat.

And then he looks at the man on his knees before him, on the other side of the desk.

Seungcheol is the picture of spite, glaring through blackened, swollen eyes, patched up cuts and bruises. Really, Jaesung would love to know which of those punk kids under Jeonghan's command did this. He'll have to thank them for getting the easy, boring stuff out of the way; now Jaesung can focus on bleeding him slow.

Until there's nothing left.

"You're fucking crazy," Seungcheol spits without prompt. "When they find out what you've done - when Jeonghan - "

"Oh don't worry, I've planned for that." Jaesung takes another shot, closes his eyes for a moment at the sensation of the alcohol sliding down his throat again. Warming his body. "You know, Seungcheol-ah, I should commend you. You did exactly as I thought you would. Played right into my plans."

He grits his teeth. "Jeonghan will kill you, you piece of shit."

He shrugs. "Maybe he will, or maybe I'll pull the trigger first. Either way I get part of what I've always wanted: the two of you dead. I won't get the gang now, I know that, but… but it's still gratifying knowing you and Jeonghan both will die. At my hands."

“What makes you think he’ll come for me?”

Jaesung grins at this because, as if on cue, a few figures emerge from the open warehouse doors. “Don’t worry,” he repeats. “I’ve planned for that too.”

Seungcheol follows his gaze - and something akin to a snarl leaves his lips the moment his eyes land on Chan carried in by two of Jaesung’s men. “Fuck, I’ll kill you myself.”

“Sure, Seungcheol-ah.” He stands up as Chan is shoved to the floor beside Seungcheol and for a moment he just watches. Watches Seungcheol tend to him as best as he can without the use of his hands. He murmurs quietly to him, no doubt words of comfort. God, he’s so much like his mother.

“Why are you doing this?”

Chan’s voice cracks on the last word and Jaesung looks at him. He’s got tear tracks on his cheeks amidst a few small bruises, no doubt from the fight he’d put up when his men had taken him. And as delightful as that is, he’s not the one Jaesung wants bloodied and begging for mercy. No, Chan’s just here as bait.

Hurting him will simply be a bonus.

“Why am I doing this?” Jaesung parrots, and Chan looks up at him through bleary eyes. “I - “

“Because you’re fucking crazy, that’s why,” Seungcheol snaps.

Jaesung rolls his eyes and without even thinking about it, he reaches out and slaps Seungcheol across his bruised, broken face. The pained groan he lets out is deeply satisfying but not nearly enough to sate the bloodlust building within him. “Don’t interrupt me, boy.”

But Seungcheol just glares at him again, looking like the petulant child he is.

And Chan has tears in his eyes.

Like the child *he* is.

Jaesung grins.

This is going to be fun.

Notes for the Chapter:

seungcheol best boy, lee chan best boy, seungkwan best boy, wonwoo best boy... everyone best boy but jaesung :(((

Chapter 21

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm sorry i keep leaving this fic in the dust for some time... these last chapters are incredibly difficult to write and i want to thank you all for being so patient with me.

tw: non-graphic, brief torture.

enjoy! <3

twenty-one: a reason to live

For Jeonghan, Hwaseong has always been home. Even after his mother was killed here, it was still his home. Granted, after that it'd become haunted with phantoms and shrouds of the past, of a past he knew he could never have again. But he still preferred to be here. Because here, time seemed to stand still. Out in the fields behind their home, staring out over the lake that was almost always too cold to swim in (but that never stopped him and Chan from jumping in it every summer), Jeonghan could forget everything. There wasn't the hustle and bustle of the city to bring him back to himself, there were no people lurking about to send shocks of paranoia through his nervous system. No, out there it was just him, the breeze through the tree above his head, and his mind.

Even now, just watching the sun set through its reflection on the glassy lake, he feels a strange modicum of peace. This has always been his happy place. When eomma and abeoji would fight, he'd come here. When Channie was being a pest, he'd come here. After his mother's funeral he spent a sleepless night out here, concluding that she'd forgive him if he waded into that lake and never came out. Whenever school got tough or he wanted to forget that he was a teenager in a gang, he'd sit out here. Listen to music. Read. Cry. And when he was in prison… well, he'd think about this spot. He'd think about sitting against the base of his tree and being by himself.

He hasn't been back here since… since before prison.

If he tries his best, he can stop thinking. If he forces his mind into submission, he can block out everything that happened today. If he wants to, he could shut down. Become the shell of a man his father was, driven by power and lust and violence. The man he wanted Jeonghan to become.

The man he should be.

Sanghoon would've had no problems executing Seungcheol in front of the others. And Joshua and Wonwoo would've been taken downstairs to have examples made of them. After that their bodies, broken and bloodless, would've been discarded somewhere nameless. Because that was just the kind of ruthless man Yoon Sanghoon was. He only cared about loyalty and the moment anyone broke that, they were done for. No begging, no second chances. Nothing.

Jeonghan had tried to be that way with Nam Kyuwon and he'd ended up with his face in a toilet, vomiting up acidic stomach fluids. And Nam Kyuwon had been *nothing* to him.

God, Jeonghan knows he's weak. That's why he ran instead of making sure Junhui and Minghao were doing what was asked of them. That's why he hasn't answered his phone, why he's content to just stay here. He's no leader. He's just a fool.

Fuck.

That's the worst part about it: he *knew.*

Waiting to strike against Yooseok's men in the warehouse down in Miryang, listening to them talk about traitors, he'd known. It was clear as fucking day. He just didn't want to believe it because he was in love with Seungcheol and Seungcheol was in love with him and for once, just once, he wanted to be happy.

He wanted to trust someone. Wanted to let them in.

Fuck, his chest aches with tears he will not shed and he sinks to the ground in front of the tree he spent most of his childhood near. How… how could

Seungcheol do this to him, to his men? Play with their loyalty, their trust, their *love* so easily, so recklessly?

Yet deep down, just like he knew Seungcheol's identity, he knows it's not so simple. Even though he wants it to be so badly. Because then it wouldn't hurt as much. If he could just write off Seungcheol as a simple rat, a simple traitor he could hold no remorse over killing, he wouldn't be here.

But he *can't.* Because Seungcheol is so much more than a simple rat, a simple traitor.

He holds Jeonghan's entire heart, and the aching that comes with that realization spreads through Jeonghan's body like a wildfire.

Despite everything, he's still in love with Seungcheol.

Jeonghan brings his legs close to his body, rests his chin on his knees, and closes his eyes. He won't cry again. Not for Seungcheol. God, he's done that so many fucking times already what's the point? What good will it do him?

If he was half the man his father was, Jeonghan would've killed Seungcheol without hesitation.

If he was half the man his father was, he would've gone after Jaesung with a clear mind and clear intent, consequences be damned.

But instead Jeonghan's here, scared like the child he is. Hiding away from a world that he's never felt safe in, never felt at home in, until…

No.

He thinks about the first time he ever saw Seungcheol's face: big, brown eyes staring back at him on a contraband phone, eyes that seemed to hold so much emotion even in a NIS ID card picture. He thinks about meeting him in person, how incredibly fucking handsome he was. But tense. He'd been tense (God, Jeonghan just ignored all the warning signs didn't he?) and those eyes had been guarded. Yet Jeonghan thought about them that night, as he

slept next to Mingyu for the first time in years. Wondered if Choi Seungcheol was anything like his father, his uncle.

He thinks about the panic, the fear, the anger that had consumed him when he learned about Sanghoon's death. Blaming Seungcheol had been the easiest, most obvious route and he'd taken it. Taken it all the way till he thought he hated Seungcheol when really, all he hated was his dead father and the role he now had to fill. The role he wasn't - isn't - ready for. And Seungcheol had been there. Taking his misplaced hatred with as much grace as someone could muster in that situation. Calming him through panic attacks, looking at him so gently in the training room that day, even though his hands and intentions had been less than gentle. Refusing to touch Jeonghan so he wouldn't get between him and Mingyu.

But then maybe two weeks later he'd touched Jeonghan with slow, soft hands that left him craving, aching for an intimacy he'd never wanted before. Then the bullet that had been meant for him. The talks of traitors, of rats that had Jeonghan questioning everything he knew but he went ahead and lost himself in Seungcheol anyway because he couldn't fathom it. Couldn't fathom that this warm, sweet man - who loves so fully, who forgives without thought - would be capable of hurting him like that.

He thinks about Yeongheungdo. Of the words they'd shared, the promises they'd made, knowing they couldn't keep them. The touches and kisses and how close Seungcheol had held him. Every single night.

"...I wanted you to have more time with him. I wanted you to realize that... that you could survive this. That you could love and get hurt but it'd be okay. Because it will."

Joshua's words ring through his head and Jeonghan squeezes his eyes shut at them, reaches desperate, clawing hands to his head like he might tear them straight from his brain.

How can he go back? How can he face his men after what they saw him go through? After he just let Minghao and Junhui take Seungcheol away, even though he should be the one to personally deal with him?

And then… Jaesung.

Fresh anger, hot and throbbing, sears through Jeonghan's being and he should've fucking known. It makes so much sense - and yet it doesn't. His father's closest friend, his confidante, his partner *killed* him. Schemed with one of their own and Sanghoon's rival to kill him. Roped his trusting, loving nephew into his game of revenge, of control.

He deserves to die. He deserves to die for what he's done. But Jeonghan doesn't have the strength to hunt him down, to face him.

Not when the only person keeping him sane has now brought about his undoing.

He's content to stay here and hide for the rest of his life. Wait for Jaesung to find him and take what he's wanted for far too long, apparently: Jeonghan's life.

He'll let the others decide what to do with Seungcheol - torture him, kill him, give him back to the NIS.

Because Jeonghan is no leader. He never has been and he never will be.

Everything that happened today only confirms that.

Heaving a heavy, choking sigh, Jeonghan leans back against the tree and just looks out over what used to be his backyard, the extent of his whole world. Flora and shrubbery Sanghoon let grow out of control after his mother passed, vines curling up along the side of the house. Years ago he would play out here without a care in the world. How he wishes he could go back to those days, when he was Lee Jeonghan and all he wanted in life was to be a prosecutor. Or a social worker. Something where he could help people.

Judging by the sunset it's probably nearing seven which means his other life, his parallel self, would probably be home from work by now. Maybe to a family. Probably to a cat. He'd live somewhere quiet, somewhere unassuming. Pop in a movie, eat some food, and then he'd head to bed. Wake up, get dressed without slipping a gun into his belt, and do it all again.

Would he be happy, though, in a life like that?

Would he be happy living away from the gang? Doing what he wants? Living a life without violence?

Would he be happy settled down and domestic?

His thoughts turn back to Yeongheungdo. Grocery shopping with Seungcheol. Waking up to him every morning. Holding his hand and snuggling and watching movies and going for hikes and exploring that little corner of their world together. Nothing but the two of them. And how *nice* that had been.

He could do it, if he really wanted to. Fake his death. Take some money. Make a life somewhere else far from Seoul, far from Korea. With Chan.

He'd never have to come back to this life.

But could he do it? Could he leave his boys behind and be selfish? For once in his life?

The sound of a car pulling up, tires crunching over gravel, tears Jeonghan from his reverie and he scrambles up on weak legs to face whoever it is that's come for him. Unarmed, unprepared. So he stands and listens quietly. Listens as the car turns off - the rumble of the engine is definitely familiar - as one of the doors slams shut. As the sound of boots on gravel eventually softens into muted steps as they touch grass.

As he catches sight of Joshua.

The moment their eyes meet Joshua stops in his tracks and he deflates. Everything about him seems to fall - fuck, he even drops to his knees in the grass and Jeonghan is reminded of a desperate, sobbing Seungcheol prostrating himself before him. Begging for forgiveness Jeonghan isn't sure he had in him to give.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, his voice a broken whisper, yet it carries across the wind, across the distance between them.

“You’re alive,” Joshua breathes. “I - I wasn’t sure you’d be here but I… I…”

The sorrow in his voice strikes a chord deep within Jeonghan and breaks his heart. But he wishes it didn’t. He wishes he could just shut it *off*. “Go away,” he bites out, but he’s not sure if he actually means it. “I don’t want to see you.”

“Jeonghan, please.”

He looks at Joshua, at the tears in his eyes. At the love and remorse he holds there and Jeonghan *aches*. He shouldn’t want to forgive Joshua. He should want to hurt him, to make him beg for forgiveness the way Seungcheol tried. But he’s weak. He’s scared. And he needs his best friend.

Somehow he makes it over on shaking legs that refuse to hold him up and then he’s on his knees too, sobbing as he’s unceremoniously tugged half onto Joshua’s lap. Sobbing as he wraps his arms around him and buries his face in Shua’s neck. Everything bursts through the dam he’d spent all afternoon constructing - grief and anger and despair and fear, and he lets it all out into the collar of Joshua’s shirt.

Above his own sobs he can hear Joshua’s soft, kind voice. Comforting him. Apologizing. Long fingers in his hair, stroking and curling the way he knows, because soothing Jeonghan has been Joshua’s job for years now. And it’s so easy to fall back into it. To let Joshua hold him like this, like he didn’t betray Jeonghan’s trust for over a month.

But in his heart, he knows he can never hate Joshua. There’s too much between them, too much they share.

So he clings to him.

“I’m scared,” he manages around a hitching sob, breathing in Joshua’s familiar scents - his shampoo, his cologne. So thoroughly Joshua that it makes Jeonghan’s heart clench. “I-I can’t do this, I can’t - I can’t…”

“It’s gonna be okay.” But the placation feels perfunctory. Strained.

He shakes his head at it, clinging even tighter. Like a child. "I can't face Jaesung, I can't - God, I'm not - I can't fucking do this."

"Jeonghan." His voice is firm and he gently pulls back. But Jeonghan refuses to meet his gaze. There's always been something about the way Joshua looks at him in moments like these and right now he can't stand it. "You can do this; I know you can."

"Not without *him,"* and as he admits it, his whole world seems to fall apart.

In such a short amount of time he came to rely so heavily on Seungcheol. His kind eyes, his warmth, his strength. His unconditional love and support, even when they were supposed to hate each other. Even when they were supposed to be enemies.

Without Seungcheol, Jeonghan feels weak.

It hurts almost as much as his betrayal.

"Junhui didn't hurt him that badly," Shua says as he gently guides Jeonghan's face back into his neck. Like he knows exactly what he needs - of course he does. "He can still be of use to us, whatever that means for you."

But Jeonghan's heart constricts at the thought of *anyone* hurting Seungcheol. Of him bleeding for the sins he's committed, bleeding for the hurt and the pain he's caused. And that only makes him more upset because - *fuck,* he should hate Seungcheol.

But he *can't.*

And his soul aches. His heart, his body, his mind. Everything - all of it - he feels utterly gutted. Wounded. Like he's missing a part of him. Like he's been left for dead.

"It hurts," he cries.

"I know," Joshua whispers. "I know, and I'm sorry."

“I should hate him. I should want to kill him - “ he remembers pointing his gun at Seungcheol, knowing he did not possess the strength to actually pull the goddamn trigger - “but… God, it fucking *hurts.”*

They were going to go back to Yeongheungdo. They were going to Tokyo with Channie. Jeonghan planned for a future with Seungcheol - he wanted Seungcheol there with him, at his side…

“It’s going to hurt for a long time,” Joshua murmurs. “You loved him - maybe you still do. And that’s something you’ve never known before. So yeah, you’re gonna be in a lot of pain, Han. Along with - with everything else today: Jaesung… me.”

He whispers that last syllable so brokenly and Jeonghan clings to him, gripping his shirt with white knuckles.

He’s lost so much today. He can’t lose Joshua either. That might - it might kill him.

“I could never hate you, Shua,” he whispers. “And I… I know why you did what you did.”

He’d spent the hour-long drive here going back and forth with himself, staring down an increasingly blurry road as he wrestled with Joshua’s motives. Wrestled with understanding them. Because betrayal would not have come easy to Joshua, not with their bond. Their history.

“I shouldn’t have done it,” Joshua says now. “I wish I wouldn’t have. Maybe then you wouldn’t be hurting like this.”

Taking a deep breath Jeonghan sits back. He wipes his eyes. He looks at his best friend’s red, splotchy face. The tears he won’t shed because he doesn’t think he deserves to - God, he knows Joshua better than he knows himself. And he sighs heavily. “Do you remember all the nights we would spend out here?” he whispers. “When abeoji first found you? We were - we were ten and you were so traumatized you just… you didn’t talk. But I still wanted to be your best friend. So we would just sit out here by the tree over there and just… sit. Sometimes I’d talk to you. But usually we were just quiet.”

Joshua smiles sadly, tearily. "Of course I remember. My Korean was terrible back then and you'd sit and talk about your favorite shows for hours and I would think 'what the hell is this kid talking about'?"

Despite everything, Jeonghan laughs. It comes out more choked and sadder than happy. But it still lifts his spirits a bit. "Do you remember the first words you said to me?"

He nods, arms tightening around Jeonghan's body. "'I'm sorry'," he whispers, sounding so much like he did back then. Of course, sixteen years ago his Korean was a lot more broken, more heavily accented. But the guilt he held is still there, even though the situations are vastly different.

Ten year old Joshua apologized for being 'useless', as Sanghoon had said. For not speaking for months on end. For the trauma he went through. For something Jeonghan never blamed him for.

And now, twenty-six year old Joshua is apologizing again. For something Jeonghan could never hate him for.

"It hurts," he whispers, "but I think I'm - I'm morbidly glad that you did what you did. That… that it led to Seungcheol telling me now." Fresh tears spring to his eyes and he swallows against the lump in his throat. "I wanted a future with him." God, he sounds so fucking broken to his own ears. "I wanted - I wanted him there always. So I'm - I'm glad everything came out now. It probably would've hurt a lot more further down the line."

Joshua just hugs him close again and Jeonghan burrows into his warmth, into the safety and comfort his presence provides. Has always provided. "I won't ever forgive myself, Han."

"You don't forgive yourself for a lot of things, Shua. Things that don't matter in the grand scheme of things."

"But this *does* matter. And I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, to everyone. If you'll have me at your side again."

He shifts to kiss the side of Joshua's head. "It was never anyone else's position to have."

And with that, they fall into silence, broken only by the whisper of a breeze through the trees. Eventually Jeonghan shifts off of Joshua to sit on the ground beside him - he doesn't know how much time has passed, only that the sun has now fully slipped behind the coastline, shrouding them in darkness. And he still doesn't know what he's going to do. Jaesung is out there somewhere, thinking he can just get away with this - fuck, maybe Jeonghan's ready to face him.

Maybe… maybe he doesn't need Seungcheol after all.

And he's not sure if that should hurt or not.

The quiet between them is shattered by a shrill, yet distant ringtone. Jeonghan lifts his head towards the tree and sees his phone lighting up. He sighs as anxiety finds its way back into his muscles, tightening them.

"They need you, Han," Joshua whispers. "You're our leader."

He doesn't have it in himself to fight that anymore, so on trembling legs Jeonghan gets up. He walks towards his phone, consistently ringing. Whoever's calling must be desperate to reach hi -

The moment he sees the caller ID, his heart sinks.

He reaches for it with shaking hands, hands that aren't moving as quickly as he would like them to, and he answers the call with a swipe of his thumb.

Heart pounding.

"Channie?"

His brother breaks into a sob - it crackles, sharp and pitiful, over the line. *"Hy-hyung, please come home - there's - someone's here - "*

Above Chan's desperate words he can hear something. A heavy thudding.

And then Chan shrieks.

Jeonghan's heart stops. His breath catches. He breaks into a run, calling Chan's name into his phone as he heads back for Joshua. There's someone in his house, someone's after Chan - someone's after his brother -

"I didn't think Sanghoon's kid would cry this much."

He knows that voice. Over the blood thundering in his body, over the static in his head, over Chan's sobs - Jeonghan knows that voice.

He knows who's after Chan.

"I'll fucking kill you," he seethes into the phone as he stops in front of Joshua. As any despair he feels is replaced by white-hot rage, racing through his body like a livewire. As he hears Chan kicking and screaming - fuck he must be so fucking scared and Jeonghan isn't there fuck fuck fuck - "Do you hear me, you fucking traitor? I swear to God, I'll tear you apart. You and Jaesung and any other goddamn rat you've got with you."

"Hyung - "

And just like that, his entire demeanor changes. Chan sounds so lost so scared - "Channie, hold on. Please, just hold on. I'll be there - I'll get you, Channie please…"

He trails off as he's met with quiet again.

"Han?"

He ends the call as he looks at Joshua standing in front of him, face almost unreadable in the darkness. But he can make out fear, the same fear starting to edge its way into himself. Buzzing around his skull.

And anger.

Anger Jeonghan's never felt before. Anger that seethes in him, hot and red and incalculable. Unrestrained. Anger that threatens his composure, anger that Choi Jaesung and all of the men at his back will not survive.

“Jaesung has Chan,” he snarls.

“And Seungcheol,” Joshua says, locking his phone as he slips it back into his pocket.

Jeonghan stops. Takes a breath. He can’t think straight in his current state, doesn’t want anything else but Jaesung bleeding out in front of him - yet the thought of Seungcheol at his hands; the thought of Seungcheol, who did everything in the name of love, as selfish as it was, at the mercy of an uncle who hates him, who apparently has no qualms about hurting and killing those he’s supposed to care about…

The thought of losing Seungcheol forever, even if there’s nothing left for them now, tears a fresh wound inside his soul.

And then there’s a moment, a moment that doesn’t last long enough for Jeonghan to truly register it, but it’s there all the same. An eye in the storm swirling, thundering inside him. A shred of peace.

Seungcheol will not let Chan get hurt, Jeonghan is sure of that.

Even if it kills him.

“Jeonghan?”

He looks at Joshua again. And he knows what he has to do. He knows what is being asked of him, as Chan’s hyung, as Seungcheol’s heartbroken lover. As leader of this gang, as guardian of these men he’s sworn to protect. Men who would do anything for him.

Men he’s prepared to lay his life down for.

“Contact the other branches,” he bites out as he heads towards Joshua’s car, and Shua follows close behind him.

“I already did. The moment you walked out of the meeting room. I wasn’t going to let you face Jaesung alone.”

Jeonghan stops and turns towards Joshua for a quiet second. There's still so much that needs to be discussed, so much they need to face and address. But it'll have to wait. "Tell them to meet us at headquarters. As soon as they're all there, we head out."

As Joshua drives, Jeonghan gets on the phone. He speaks through Junhui, orders his men to prepare for war. And he can hear the pain in Junhui's usually warm voice, the clipped way in which he delivers Jeonghan's instructions. He knows once this is all over… well, just like between him and Joshua, they'll need to figure out where they all stand with each other.

But for now… for now they'll fight for one common cause. For now, they'll prove their loyalty once more and Jeonghan will feel like he doesn't deserve a single one of them in his life.

For now, he's come to terms with his role in this, as their leader. And he'll stand with his men as long as they stand with him.

The branch from Daejeon are the first to arrive; they've been there half an hour when Jeonghan and Joshua return. And soon after that, everyone else begins to show up. They congregate in the meeting room that takes up most of the top floor - made for situations like these - and everything around Jeonghan is a buzzing cacophony of noise, of adrenaline, of emotion. He's spent as much time as he can with his own men (squeezing Vernon's hand as they watched Daewon's surgeon tending to Seungkwan's wound, trying to swallow down the rage that had threatened because Vernon needed his hyung; consoling a tense, teary Wonwoo who has no reason to cry but Jeonghan's pretty certain he knows why he is), but right now they have to be all business.

There's no room for anything else.

With numbers like these, they're a certifiable army. And Jaesung doesn't stand a chance.

They're counting arms, pinpointing Jaesung's location with a team of the best hackers in Korea - all of whom are under Jeonghan's command - stockpiling

medical supplies (the thought of Jaesung torturing Chan or Seungcheol makes Jeonghan want to punch a fucking wall but they have to be prepared for anything), even running last minute sparring sessions.

“Jaesung has a lot of men on his side,” Jeonghan tells the crowd of them once, met with silent, attentive gazes. Loyal gazes. “The men I edged out when my father died - Song Yooseok’s men, anyone his corrupt NIS contact could provide him with. But there’s more of us.”

“We’re not sparing a single person, are we?” Daewon asks, and his unendingly loyalty to the gang - a loyalty Jaesung had ironically instilled in him decades ago - has morphed into hatred for his traitor uncle.

Jeonghan’s grateful.

“I want Jaesung alive,” he bites out, “but other than that - leave no one alive.”

Nods and words of affirmation go up around him.

“What about Seungcheol?” Daewon asks, hesitance in his deep voice. “He’s a traitor too, isn’t he?”

Before Jeonghan can respond, his phone dings.

A text. Not a call.

His head snaps towards it, sitting offensively on the table in front of him. Joshua’s head too. Junhui’s. The only people who would need to contact him are here -

The entire room has gone silent at this point, watching Jeonghan reach for his phone. Like they all had the same, collective thought.

Hands shaking, he unlocks it.

It’s a text message from an unknown number. Two messages. The first reads *“show this to the class”.* And the second is a video with a black initial frame and Jeonghan is terrified to click on it.

There's only one person this could be from.

And there's only one thing that Jaesung would want him to show everyone.

Hands shaking, he turns the phone over to Wonwoo who finds a way to connect it to the projector in this room. Hands shaking he moves back to his spot at the head of the table. Hands shaking he tries to prepare himself for what he knows he'll see, what they'll all see.

There's no way Jaesung took Chan and Seungcheol and didn't put his hands on them.

"Play the video," he manages around the lump in his throat.

Hands shaking, Wonwoo does as he's told.

The moment he sees Seungcheol on the recording, all the breath leaves Jeonghan's body. He's not sure how long it's been since they last saw each other - half a day at least - but somehow in those hours he's become a shell of the man he was that morning. Shirtless, tied to a chair with his arms behind his back.

Bruised and broken from Junhui's fists. Maybe from Jaesung's too.

Bloodied from shallow cuts on his chest, cuts that - that look like -

Traitor, one of the cuts reads through the crimson droplets racing down his sweaty, pallid skin. Another spells out *liar.*

And the churning in Jeonghan's stomach confirms that Junhui is not responsible for those.

Seungcheol looks above the camera through black, swollen eyes, half-lidded around a shattered nose. He looks above the camera, fixing his torturer with a venomous gaze.

"He'll kill you for this," he hisses in a harsh voice, to his unseen assailant. *"And I'll watch him do it, you fucking psycho."*

Somewhere off camera there's a sharp, cold laugh and it sends sick shivers through Jeonghan's body. But its owner doesn't step into sight to claim it; he merely changes the camera's angle.

And Jeonghan would fall to his knees if he didn't feel several pairs of hands curling into his clothes, keeping him upright. Keeping him steady.

Chan, his sweet, kind, *innocent* brother, is similarly bound, right next to Seungcheol. But he lolls forward against his bindings - unconscious?

There's a broken curse from nearby - sounds so much like Wonwoo - but Jeonghan can't tear his gaze away to confirm it. Not with how small and helpless his brother looks. *Goddamn*it, Jeonghan should've been here. He should've been here should've been here -

"Don't fucking touch him," Seungcheol snarls, unseen but ever protective.

A sob tears its way up Jeonghan's throat.

The hands holding him tighten their grip.

"Yes I know," Jaesung sighs from behind the camera, sounding bored. But the angle changes again, showing a weary yet indignant Seungcheol. *"Aren't you getting bored of playing the hero, Seungcheol? Of taking the brunt of the pain for someone you'll never see again?"*

"Wonwoo-yah," Joshua starts from one of Jeonghan's sides, "can you track who sent this text?"

"He's innocent," Seungcheol spits. *"I won't let you hurt him."*

"Wonwoo," Joshua calls again in the other's silence, firmer this time. "I know you're upset - "

"Hurt me as much as you like," Seungcheol continues, the words sliced into his skin continuing to bleed. *"Just not Chan."*

He glances into the camera - and for a moment Jeonghan feels like there's no one else around him. All he can register is the look in Seungcheol's

deadened eyes. It's the look of a man who's given up, who's resigned himself to his fate. Who has nothing left to live for.

Jaesung chuckles darkly and there's movement as the camera is handed off to someone else.

He steps into the frame.

Jeonghan snarls at the sight of him, every nerve in his body screaming in warning.

"Jeonghan-ah," he says brightly as he looks into the camera, blocking his view of Seungcheol. *"I truly hope you're not surprised. Did you really think I wouldn't find out everything that happened?* Everyone *saw your men leading Seungcheol downstairs and the news spread like wildfire. Unfortunately, so did word of my plans but at this point… well, at this point I know I won't get everything I want."* The bastard sounds regretful, like he stood even a tiny chance of taking over. *"But I could get some of it, with your help, Jeonghan."*

He turns towards Seungcheol and Chan, the angle widening a bit to show all three of them.

Jaesung smiles coldly, evilly.

Jeonghan can't remember the last time he took a fucking breath.

"I could use your help, too." Jaesung kneels in front of Chan, who sways a bit, eyes fluttering. So he's not unconscious. But he… he doesn't look as beat up as Seungcheol. Actually only a small collection of cuts and bruises adorn his face, flat and emotionless. Glazed over eyes. *Fuck. "Channie? Are you awake?"*

"Don't touch him - don't fucking touch him, Jaesung you piece of shit!" Seungcheol snaps, railing against his bindings. *"I'm the one you want, leave him alo - "*

He's interrupted by a sharp slap across his already bruised face, and a whimper that sounds like it doesn't belong to him escapes his lips. But he stares at Jaesung with tired defiance.

Jeonghan has no idea how long they've been there but knowing Seungcheol he probably hasn't stopped fighting the entire time.

His stomach churns.

He wants to vomit.

"These heroics are already getting old, boy," Jaesung huffs. *"Though I'm curious how you'll react when I've got your lover here."*

"You know he won't come for me," Seungcheol hisses through gritted teeth, a new spot of blood blooming on his cheek. And he sounds broken. Resigned.

Jeonghan doesn't know if he's right - if Chan weren't there, would Jeonghan be amassing this army?

Jaesung smiles. *"And that's why our sweet little Chan is here."* But before he can turn towards him again though, Seungcheol spits in his face. A mixture of blood and saliva slips down Jaesung's face, right along his cheek, and his composure snaps. With a hand as steady as stone he reaches out and knots fingers in Seungcheol's matted hair, forcing his head back.

Seungcheol breathes in harshly.

"I was surprised when my men found you in the state you were in," Jaesung snarls. *"I assumed Jeonghan himself would've done so much worse to you, if not Junhui or Mingyu. But a few punches? A broken nose?"* He tsks. *"Why don't we show them how to properly treat a traitor?"*

There's someone saying "no" over and over again - Jeonghan doesn't realize it's himself until another sob wracks his body.

Jaesung releases Seungcheol's head and moves behind him to untie one of his arms. The right one. The one with the gang tattoo wrapped around his forearm. It becomes Jaesung's target: he stares at it with hard eyes.

"You don't deserve to have this anymore," he hisses as he reties Seungcheol's right wrist to the chair's armrest.

"I didn't want it in the goddamn first place," Seungcheol bites.

Jaesung moves close to the edge of the frame, thanks someone quietly, and steps back in.

Holding a small blowtorch.

Jeonghan doesn't pay attention to the noises of disgust, of protest going up around the other gang members. He doesn't pay attention to the hands holding him so tight. God his entire body goes numb and he can't fucking watch can't - he *can't* -

Seungcheol cries out, anguished, excruciating, scared.

Jeonghan wants to curl into himself at the sound.

"Stop the video," Joshua bites out as he pulls Jeonghan into him. He's hoarse. Pained. Strong and warm and Jeonghan can't do this - *please* he can't he can't - "Wonwoo, *now."*

Silence.

Jeonghan can feel what seems like millions of eyes on him - eyes that look to him to lead, to guide, to guard, and he can't do this.

Not when Jaesung is making Seungcheol bleed when he doesn't deserve it.

Not when Jaesung is hurting his brother.

His phone dings again, and it's foreboding in the silence.

"They're at a warehouse on Gyodongdo Island," Wonwoo whispers, sounding just as broken as Jeonghan feels. "I have the address."

"Get the cars ready," Joshua commands, with all the strength Jeonghan wishes he possessed. "We're heading out now."

“Shua,” he whines, and he can’t do this please don’t make him do this -

“I know, Hannie, I know.”

Action breaks out around them but Jeonghan stays where he is. He can’t face any of it, not with Seungcheol’s screams burned into his skull. Not with the thought of Chan hurt and bleeding - he sags against Joshua as his knees go weak -

“I know you’re scared,” Joshua whispers, sounding a million miles away, “but they need you, Han. We all need you. Please.”

There’s a new hand curling through his hair, another one running down his arm, his back -

“We’ll get them,” Junhui whispers, behind him. “They’ll be alive. And I swear to God we will not let Jaesung live after this.”

“Hyung, please,” Mingyu murmurs, somewhere nearby. God they all sound underwater, Jeonghan can’t focus - “This isn’t the time to break like this. Please, it’s gonna be okay.”

“I can’t do this,” he whispers, to everyone, to no one in particular. “He’s hurting them - “

“And we’ll hurt him right back,” Joshua says. “But we need you with us.”

Jeonghan takes a shaky breath. And then another one. More and more until his breathing evens out, until the lump in his throat is gone. Only then does he lift his head.

The only ones left in the room are him and his closest friends. The men who know him best, who love him most in the world. They need him.

And Jeonghan needs them too.

“You heard Shua,” he rasps quietly, not meeting anyone’s eyes. He doesn’t have it in him. “We’re heading out.”

They exchange glances but do as they're told; and within a few minutes Jeonghan is completely alone ("I'll be down soon," he'd told a wary Joshua, who looked absolutely reluctant to leave his side).

He can't get his legs to work.

There's too much at stake for him to just sit here and hide. Not when his brother is terrified for his life, at the mercy of a man who is obviously unhinged. Not when the love of his life is bleeding, *burning* in repentance. For redemption.

There is nothing for him and Seungcheol now, he knows it.

But Seungcheol doesn't deserve this fate. He never has.

And in that moment, Jeonghan thinks he finally understands *why.* Why Seungcheol kept the truth of everything hidden from him. Why he broke when he did.

Jeonghan understands because he would've done the exact same thing.

He takes a deep breath and it doesn't catch in his throat. His legs start to work again. And for the first time all day, his head feels clear. He knows what he needs to do. What he *will* do. Even if he doesn't want to – God, even if the thought fills him with such lung-crushing anxiety.

It's his responsibility.

And he needs to be strong now.

So he meets everyone else downstairs. The members of the other branches are finishing loading people, supplies into cars. Most of them are gone at this point, once again leaving Jeonghan and his men. And he watches them for a moment, as he stands near the entrance of the garage.

Seokmin comforts Joshua with gentle hands on his shoulders, murmuring quietly. Joshua ducks in for a soft kiss.

Minghao holds Junhui's hand, running a slow thumb over his bandaged knuckles.

Mingyu has Wonwoo and Vernon under one arm each, grinning as he ruffles their hair, pokes their faces to make them smile. Though the look on his own face is guarded, terse.

Jihoon leans his head against Soonyoung's shoulder, squeezes his hand.

And Jeonghan's heart warms. Their numbers might be thinned for now but this is why Jeonghan is here. For them.

He clears his throat - it echoes in the all but empty parking garage - and they all turn to look at him. "Are we ready?" he asks as he approaches on legs that are a lot more stable than they were fifteen minutes ago.

"We are," Joshua says quietly, with soft, attentive eyes. They seem to cut into Jeonghan's soul in a way that only Joshua can manage. Since he knows him best in the world. "Are you, Han?"

He nods, and he actually feels sure of himself. "We'll get them back," he says.

"Seungcheol too?" Mingyu asks quietly.

Jeonghan meets his cautious, curious gaze. Thinks about Seungcheol protecting Chan when he could've just… And he knows what he'll say before the words leave his lips. "Yes. We don't leave our men to die like that, do we?"

A smile spreads across Mingyu's lips but he tries to hide it as he squeezes Vernon and Wonwoo into tight, one-armed hugs. "No sir. We don't."

"Then let's go," Jeonghan says. "Chan and Seungcheol need us and… and we're not letting them down."

Not again.

Notes for the Chapter:

oof we goin to war now

Chapter 22

Notes for the Chapter:

> i'm so sorry this has taken me so long; originally i planned more for this chapter but i honestly don't know when i'll have time to write it so i decided to just post what i have.
>
> tw: torture, vomiting (two mentions and then one actual instance), brief mention of past rape/non-con.

twenty-two: absolution

Gyodongdo Island is a frustrating, soul-crushing hour and a half from Seoul and Jeonghan spends the entire drive with his hands balled into fists, nails digging into the skin until they break through. But the wet, stinging pain helps clear his mind and he watches neighborhoods and small cities put themselves to sleep as Mingyu drives. Behind him, Joshua is in constant contact with the other cars, murmuring into his phone in a low voice that's almost calming. But there's too much at stake for Jeonghan to relax.

Too much he stands to lose and he can't take that.

Joshua told him, on the outskirts of Gimpo, that he'd watched the rest of the video. That Jaesung wants to trade: brother for brother. And they'll play along at first, try their best to trick a man that's had the drop on them for months, but Jeonghan won't admit that he'll gladly take Chan's place if it means he'll be safe. Because if he says that out loud, he'll get an earful from everyone about how he shouldn't risk his life like that. That there's no need for him to make such a sacrifice; it'll work out the way they want.

Jeonghan wishes he could be so optimistic. But he never has been, never will be. The way he sees it, they have two options: Jeonghan does as Jaesung wants and they trade. Or, they fight to the literal death, just for the chance to live.

What irony.

The car rocks just a bit as they cross the bridge; Mingyu grips the steering wheel with white knuckles.

The warehouse lies just a few minutes off of the bridge.

Jeonghan silently wills Chan and Seungcheol to hold on, just a little while longer.

When Seungcheol finally comes to, he has no idea how long he's been out, how long he and Chan have been here under Jaesung's capture. All he knows is pain, bone-deep and scorching. The kind that makes his stomach clench and twist and if he had anything in his system he knows he'd vomit. The kind that seems to cover his entire body and his exhausted, traumatized mind can't pinpoint exactly where it's coming from. What part of himself he needs to defend.

He's scared to open his eyes.

He's scared to see the damage done to him. To Chan.

Chan.

He latches onto the thought and then the desire to look becomes an overwhelming need; if Chan is hurt… or worse… he needs to know about it.

If Chan is dead, that means Seungcheol can give up. He's not the one Jeonghan cares about, anyway. And it would be so *nice,* to just… let go. Truth be told, he has no idea what his breaking point is. He's been trained, directly and indirectly, to take pain and abuse - but this is different. This isn't all at once, no; Jaesung's taking his time. Chipping away at him. Breaking his resolve with the skill of a true torturer, until he's nothing left but broken bones. Not a shred of life, a will to live, in him.

If Chan is dead, that means Jaesung wins.

"Hyung?"

Seungcheol's heart breaks at the fear in his voice - he sounds so *young* - and he finally opens his eyes.

At first all he sees is darkness, nothingness. But it only lasts a single blissful second before his eyesight adjusts. And then he sees an arm bound to the chair he's sitting on. An arm with a good portion of the skin just below the elbow burned away, giving way to bone and muscle - the edges, the remains of a familiar dragon tattoo sneaking towards the charred skin, like a warning -

Seungcheol's stomach heaves and he braces against his bonds, leaning forward far enough so that the stomach fluids racing up his throat don't land on himself. No, instead they mix with the crimson stains on the floor in a way that makes his head swim. He coughs through it, coughs through his insides churning and curling on each other, coughs through the hot, aching pain lacing up his right arm.

He's so fucking *tired.*

"Hyung," and this time Chan sounds like he's crying.

"I'm okay," Seungcheol tries in a rough, cracking voice that sounds weak to his own ears. "Are you hurt?"

"N-not really." He sniffles as Seungcheol's heart fills with relief that feels sick and unnatural in his current state. But he welcomes it nonetheless. "Hyung, I'm scared."

Seungcheol takes a deep breath. "I know, Channie, I know, and I'm so sorry." Stabbing pain tears through his torso with every word, every breath he takes and somewhere his brain tries to take stock of the injuries it perceives. *What has he done to me?* "You never should've been mixed up in this - fuck, it's my fault - "

"Don't," he whispers, "please. Just - don't leave me, okay, hyung? Please?"

"Never, Channie," Seungcheol says as firmly as he can, as he opens his eyes again and stares down the remnants of his connection to this life, scorched

from his skin in a scar that will never heal. "I'm right here. And - and your hyungs are coming too, okay? They'll be here soon and… and this will be over."

Seungcheol doesn't know if he'd rather die at Jaesung's hand or - or Jeonghan's.

"Why are you protecting me?"

He leans back into the chair as best as he can, even though his muscles and broken bones cry out in protest - and such little effort takes so much out of him. But he's not giving up, not when Chan still needs him. That's his last act of penitence - making sure Chan makes it back under Jeonghan's watchful gaze, back into Wonwoo's arms.

Even if it kills him.

"I've been trained for this," he grits out, and catching his breath has never been more difficult. "You haven't. Besides, you're innocent."

"So are you, hyung."

The thought brings a wry chuckle to his cracked lips, and it sounds tense and tortured in the empty air. "I'm not. I've done - I've messed up. I've hurt a lot of people close to me and I-I…"

"I know. But that doesn't mean you deserve *this,* hyung. You… you'll die if he keeps going."

"If it keeps you safe," he breathes, "I'll do anything, Channie."

"No."

His voice is as emphatic as Seungcheol's ever heard it and he risks further injury to turn his head and meet the young man's gaze. Chan is crying, fresh tears slipping down old tracks, and he looks so small. So young. So breakable. And because of Seungcheol's sacrifices, there's hardly a scratch on him. Maybe a few bruises, some dried blood here and there, but those

marks will heal. And it'll take therapy and years but Chan will heal from this too. Seungcheol will hold out as long as it takes to make sure of that.

"I want you to stop, hyung," Chan whispers, bound to a chair in dirty clothes and fear bright in his young eyes.

The sight of it sends a shot of adrenaline, of anger, through Seungcheol's battered body. How dare Jaesung drag him into this.

"I don't want you to kill yourself for me, *please,"* he begs around a choked-back sob. "Please, hyung, please."

He strains against the bindings holding him down and Seungcheol wants nothing more than to reach out and comfort him. But he can't. He barely has the strength to hold his own head up anymore. "Channie," he tries, as softly as he can manage. "Channie, it's okay. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere - and I can take whatever Jaesung can give me, I promise. Channie - "

A sob escapes his lips, wracking and pained, and it breaks Seungcheol's heart that much more. And then, hardly louder than a whisper, Chan says, "Hy-hyung, I'm… I'm hungry. And I… I can't feel my arms…"

Seungcheol swallows against the lump forming in his throat, against the tears that start to burn behind his eyes. Chan doesn't deserve this. He deserves to be at home, safe and sound in his bed. He doesn't deserve to feel hopeless like this, to know pain and terror like this.

Seungcheol hopes Jeonghan will keep him alive long enough to watch him kill Jaesung, if only for this alone.

"I know," he whispers. "It'll be over soon, I promise."

And then, sharp and thunderous in the room, a door slams open. A light flicks on.

Jaesung stands before them.

For the first time in his life, Seungcheol is terrified of his uncle. He knows what he is capable of, what he can do if Seungcheol pushes him far enough.

But he also knows that Jaesung won't kill him just yet. In his delusions, in his psychosis, he needs Seungcheol. Needs the pleasure of inflicting on him as much pain as possible.

Hence the slow, methodical burning of the tattoo.

Hence the myriad of broken bones, no doubt done in a way where he won't puncture a lung or his heart. Yet.

Hence the words sliced into his skin, deep enough to leave little pale scars - reminders - once they heal but light enough that bleeding out from them would be a slow, painful death.

Hence the terrible glee in his eyes, dark and wicked, as he takes Seungcheol in.

It sends shivers down his spine. But he stares back, refusing to concede just yet.

"You're awake," Jaesung says, just as bright and casual as if they were meeting for coffee before work.

It's sickening.

"I assume your little movie went over well," Seungcheol snaps, remembering the glint of the camera - the blowtorch...

He sighs lightly and leans against the door after closing it. This time, it's just the three of them. Seungcheol's eyes dart towards a table in the corner, much like Junhui's down in the basement - full of unfamiliar objects he would rather not get comfortable with.

The compact flamethrower sits there.

Seungcheol's stomach churns again.

"I don't know," Jaesung says after a moment, and his gaze hasn't slid to Chan at all. Cheol considers it a win. (Though his gaze does find the vomit on the floor and he eyes it with a smirk. Like it proves something. Like it's a little

victory for him.) "I haven't heard back. But they're on their way. So I imagine it had the intended effect. Truth be told, I almost wish it'd been a phone call. That way I could've seen the look on Jeonghan's face when I - "

"You're sick," Seungcheol bites out. "And he's going to rip you apart."

Jaesung laughs at this, a perverse sound that makes the hairs on the back of Seungcheol's neck stand up. "Jeonghan? Please. He used to be good with a sniper rifle but then he went to prison and got raped. Now he can't even torture a man without throwing up his breakfast." He rolls his eyes. "Sanghoon would be so disappointed."

But Seungcheol latches onto something else, something else that incites a darker, deeper sort of fear in him. More than anything Jaesung's said or done up to this point. "How did you know about that?"

He doesn't want to hear the answer, but he needs to. For Jeonghan's sake.

Impatience crosses Jaesung's features. "I set it up."

"You… you set it up," he repeats and it doesn't process the way it should. Because what kind of monster could do something like that? Jeonghan is his nephew as much as Seungcheol is - how could - "How *could* you?"

"The same way I poisoned my best friend and brought you into this just to kill you," Jaesung snaps, a desperate edge finding its way into his voice. "I want what's mine, Seungcheol. What's rightfully mine. And I knew something like that would break him. He was already so fucking broken to begin with - Sanghoon was a worse father than yours - but I knew I'd get what I wanted if he couldn't even lead his men without cracking." His eyes harden then, and Seungcheol resists the urge to sink into the chair, as far away as he can get from that sick, hateful gaze. "I just didn't account for you. I never thought he'd fall in love with you - I never thought you'd fall for him. So thanks to you, I'm left with this - settling for deaths I should've caused years ago instead of the gang I helped build."

"You're welcome," Seungcheol snarks.

Jaesung huffs a sigh and then makes his way towards the table.

Chan hisses in a breath.

And every one of Seungcheol's cells stand on high alert, his eyes watching each of Jaesung's movements. He examines a few particular tools - different types of knives, even a hammer - before he returns with something sharp and shiny in his grasp. A scalpel. The same one he used to slice those words into Seungcheol's skin.

He shifts against his bonds, fear rising up like bile in his throat as his mind remembers the slow, searing pain.

He can do this.

Jaesung stands before him as he knots an unforgiving hand in Seungcheol's hair, tugging his head back. And he looks like a stranger. Not like the uncle he remembers as a child, cold and distant. Not like the uncle he got reacquainted with a few months ago, kinder but firm. He looks the way Sanghoon did, the few times Seungcheol had ever seen him torturing someone: inhuman. There's nothing but blood in his eyes, the desire to cause pain and exact revenge.

If Seungcheol survives this, it's a look he will never forget, he knows. It will haunt his dreams until he's dead.

"This scar on your collarbone," he says quietly, "that's from taking a bullet for our dear Jeonghan, isn't it?"

He nods, dread rendering him speechless.

"Did it hurt?"

Seungcheol wracks his brain for the motivation to speak; it's given to him in the form of a cut along the bottom edges of his burn. And for several moments there's nothing else but *pain.* White-hot and blinding, it invades his entire body and he can't hold back the cry that escapes his lips, the tears that roll down his cheeks.

He's under Jaesung's thumb now. Completely at the mercy he does not possess.

"I asked you a question, Seungcheol-ah," his tormentor mocks above the ringing in his ears.

"Yes," he groans, willing the pain away. Willing everything to just *stop.* "It hurt - fuck - it hurt…"

With a satisfied smirk Jaesung pulls the scalpel away. "Let's see, that was… almost six weeks ago, right? The skin's obviously healed but I doubt the muscles have. Do you think it'd also hurt if I opened it back up?"

"Stop!" Chan cries.

Seungcheol barely registers it through the stinging pain that lingers. Numbly, his mind tries to alert him, tell him to watch out, but he can't grab onto it. All he can focus on is the scalpel Jaesung still holds, too close to his charred skin, stainless silver dripping with blood. All he can focus on is the promise of more pain.

"Stop hurting him!"

Chan sounds far away, under water.

"Would you rather I use this on you, Chan?" Jaesung asks, dark eyes flicking towards him. "Tired of seeing your precious hyung taking the brunt of it all?"

"Yes," he whispers, and Seungcheol wishes he wouldn't.

And the scalpel hasn't moved for several seconds; Seungcheol takes his eyes from it and looks at Chan with as much strength as he can muster. "Don't. Just - don't talk. This is between me and him. Close your eyes and - and…"

And what? Listen to his hyung suffer on his account?

But what's the better option? Seungcheol taking and taking, chasing his inevitable breaking point while Chan sits helpless? Or Chan hurt a mere few

feet away, leaving Seungcheol to live with the guilt of knowing he failed him, after everything?

The only thing that gives Seungcheol even a modicum of comfort is the thought that, once they get their hands on him, Jaesung will bleed for what he's done. Slow and controlled until there's nothing left.

"I wonder where you got this savior complex from, Seungcheol," Jaesung says, looking at him in that haunting way again. "It sure as hell wasn't from me or Jaehwan." And then something cold passes over his face as his lips curl in a derisive sneer. "It was your bitch of a mother, wasn't it?"

"Don't call her that," he tries, but it sounds weak. He doesn't even feel the familiar flash of anger that's always come with hearing that phrase - he's so tired.

But then Jaesung lets go of his hair and moves towards his peripheral vision and he goes back on high alert, every fiber of his being screaming out as Jaesung nears Chan with that bloodied scalpel. The words don't come.

Not even as Jaesung grips Chan's chin and touches the flat end of the blade to his cheek with a wicked grin. Not even as Chan whimpers in fear, trying his best to get away but there's nowhere for him to go - goddamn it -

"How far would you go to protect Channie, Seungcheol?" Jaesung asks quietly, lightly tracing the lines of Chan's face with the tip of the blade. His grin widens when he slices the lightest of scratches right along the crease of his nose.

Seungcheol's never wanted to kill someone more.

"Would you die for him?"

"Yes," he whispers, because that's the only thing keeping both him and Chan alive. For now.

Jaesung runs the edge of the blade along Chan's lips; a few tears slip down his cheeks as his lower lip splits, blood bright and red gushing up, dribbling

over.

“Enough!” Seungcheol doesn’t even recognize his own voice as he cries out, as he struggles against the bonds keeping him in place - he’s not letting Jaesung hurt Chan - he has to stop this - he has to - *Chan* -

“What about Jeonghan? The others?” Jaesung asks over the chaos pounding in Seungcheol’s head. “Joshua, Junhui, Mingyu, Vernon, Seungkwan - would you die for them?”

“What do you get out of this?” he snaps, and the friction of the rope on his skin burns. But he keeps going - even though he knows it’s in vain. “What kind of sick satisfaction do you get knowing I would give everything to keep them safe?”

Jaesung looks at him with a smile that chills Seungcheol to the bone. But he’s leaving Chan alone and that’s all that matters. “I think it’s funny. You started out so utterly loyal to the NIS and now - now you’re here. *Giving everything* for a bunch of gangsters you didn’t hesitate to deceive. Gangsters that, months ago, you would’ve killed without a second thought because they’re supposed to be the scum of the earth. And they don’t care about you. They’re not coming for *you.* Yet you sit here and take it all.” His grin widens, showing off all his teeth. “Jeonghan hates you almost as much as he hates me and yet you wouldn’t hesitate to die for him. It’s *funny.”*

And then he straightens up and something in his gaze changes.

Seungcheol’s entire body seems to go numb at the sight of it. Already it’s so familiar. He knows what awaits him now.

But it’s worth it if he leaves Chan alone.

“Since you’re so eager for absolution…”

Jaesung moves quicker than Seungcheol’s exhausted brain can handle - all he sees is silver glinting - and then -

Pain - hot - burning - sharp and stabbing, deep in his collarbones - it races through his veins and he cries out hoarse and scared - pain and he grits his teeth at it as the scalpel tears up his insides, muscles and tendons and God knows what else already mangled from a still-healing gunshot wound - pain and he can't take this anymore please make it stop please please -

"Cheol," Jeonghan whispers.

They're in a warehouse. Seungcheol's shot - bleeding - took a bullet for a man he swears he doesn't love. And Jeonghan holds him so close, he's doing so good, puts just the right amount of pressure, maybe a bit too much, but it's okay because Seungcheol's bleeding for him. Bleeding to keep him safe. Alive.

And he's still bleeding for him.

Seungcheol would've died for Jeonghan that day and -

There's a scalpel in his chest, Chan is sobbing - Jaesung grins madly, fingers wrapped like stone around the handle - Seungcheol would die for Jeonghan now.

Maybe this time it will actually happen.

Or not.

The door opens once more and Jaesung snaps up at the sound of it, turning towards a man Seungcheol vaguely recognizes.

"They're here," the man says.

And Jaesung grins.

The ocean wind whips through his jacket and hair as Jeonghan steps out of the car. The other branches are a few hundred yards away, tucked against thickets of trees Jeonghan hopes Jaesung doesn't have eyes on. So for now, it's just the ten of them. Slowly, more assured than he feels, Jeonghan walks

towards the doors of the warehouse. He's flanked by Joshua and Mingyu, and the others follow closely. There are lights on inside, but no activity other than that, and Jeonghan wonders which of these windows Chan and Seungcheol are on the other side of. If they know they're here.

And then the doors open.

Resisting the urge to just take out his gun and shoot Choi Jaesung in his awful, smug face is the hardest thing Jeonghan's ever had to do.

He comes out with a hand on Chan's shoulder, his other hand holding tight to a pistol he's got trained on Chan's temple. No one else with him.

They outnumber him by far, yet Jeonghan knows everything is not what it seems. Jaesung might be arrogant but he's not stupid. He must have men everywhere.

Or something else up his sleeve that will stop them from shooting him, incapacitating him.

Jeonghan shivers at the thought.

"Hyung," Chan sobs and Jeonghan has to pretend it doesn't break his heart. He can't afford to fracture now.

But Chan doesn't look much different than he did in the video, with the exception of a few new, small cuts.

If Chan looks like this - Jeonghan doesn't even want to think about how battered and broken Seungcheol must be. It makes him ache.

"I'm here, Jaesung," he says, and his voice comes out stronger than he thought it would. "Just as you wanted. Now let him go."

Something shines in Jaesung's eyes, something Jeonghan doesn't like.

Chan sags against him, and everything in Jeonghan cries out to pull him close and comfort him, to keep him safe from this monster.

But he can't; it's not part of the plan.

"You can't possibly think I'm that stupid," Jaesung snaps, a sick sort of mirth in his face. "Let me guess - I give you Chan and your little boys shoot. How original." He scoffs then, disdainfully. "Your father would be so disappointed in you, Jeonghan."

"He's been disappointed in me since I was a boy," he shoots back, itching to bring Chan to him. "Try a new tactic."

Jaesung just grins and it spreads across his face in a way that scares Jeonghan like he's never known before. And he's looked death in the eyes countless times. But this is different. This is raw, this is personal - this could very well be the last time he sees any of his men alive.

"You must've known," Jaesung says. "That Seungcheol wasn't on your side. You're too smart not to. So why did you let it get this far?"

"Shut up," Jeonghan snaps, "and let Chan go. We're doing this your way."

Behind him he can feel each of his men's tension; he can all but see their fingers curling around guns or knives.

"I'm hardly a man of my word, Jeonghan. Maybe you shouldn't trust that I'll stick to what I say." His grin widens as he shifts his grip on the pistol, the muzzle pressing against Chan's forehead.

He whimpers.

Jeonghan takes a step forward as his hand flies instinctively to the gun he has strapped to his hip. "You can't possibly think you'll win, Jaesung. We have the entire gang here, ready and more than willing to rain fire down on you."

"You could do that," he says, "but I've got three men with a gun each trained on your heroic loverboy's head. Kill me and he dies too."

He grits his teeth at the thought, the mention of Seungcheol. He can only imagine what he's gone through in his few hours with Jaesung. He can only imagine the wounds he's taken to keep Chan safe.

He doesn't deserve to be executed like that.

Still under Jaesung's grip, Chan murmurs something Jeonghan can't make out. But his eyes are wide now. Alert. Clear. And Jeonghan can read them clearly. Just like that, he sees right through Jaesung.

Just like that, he has the upper hand.

So he stalls. "What happened to you?" he asks, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't want to know. How could someone who claimed to be Sanghoon's best friend do something like this?

A sharp, mocking laugh passes through Jaesung's lips.

His grip on Chan, on the gun, relaxes ever so slightly.

"What happened to me?" he repeats. "This whole goddamn gang was my doing, my connections. I should've been in charge since the beginning. But Sanghoon ruined everything. So he had to go. As did you. And it all worked out perfectly when I found out Seungcheol worked for the NIS. I could kill three birds with one stone - off your father and you, as well as Jaehwan's traitor kid."

"What, so this was all some elaborate revenge plot?" Jeonghan scoffs himself. "You're fucking insane, Jaesung. There's no way you would've gotten away with this. The others would've found out soon enough."

"Maybe so. But at least I'll get part of what I want before I die."

His fingers flex against the grip, the trigger.

"And what's that?" Jeonghan asks as his blood runs cold.

"You and Seungcheol both dead." He raises his gun from Chan's temple and it finds its new target on Jeonghan. He cocks it.

No one speaks.

Jeonghan breathes in, adrenaline thrumming through his veins -

Chan snaps his head back, striking Jaesung's chin with a *crack!* And before the gun even hits the ground, Chan shoulders the older man down. Before any of them can even react, Chan lands his first punch, right in the middle of Jaesung's face.

The man who helped raise him.

The man who claimed to be their father's best friend, who claimed to be like an uncle to them.

The man who kidnapped him, hurt him, threatened his hyungs -

Jeonghan snaps into action, closing the distance between him and Chan as the sounds of punches - wet and cracking - mix with Chan's sobs. And he pulls his brother into his arms as he hears the others approach, Wonwoo begging him to stop.

He pulls Chan against him and holds him as tight as he can, winding shaking fingers through his hair.

He looks at Jaesung as he's hoisted up by Junhui and Mingyu, bleeding cuts on his face, rage in his eyes, and Jeonghan isn't scared of him anymore.

He's not scared of *anything* because Chan is safe and he knows what he has to do.

Wonwoo's there to hold Chan close as Jeonghan lets him go. As he stands before Jaesung, hatred hot and livid in his veins. As he bends down to pick up Jaesung's gun. As he cocks and aims it with a grip steady like stone, at Jaesung's right kneecap.

"Don't let him look," he tells Wonwoo without even glancing at him.

And then he pulls the trigger.

The gunshot echoes through the night air, and with it, Jeonghan knows the battle has begun. Now they fight for their lives, for revenge.

Jeonghan is done cowering now.

Blood splattered on the ground, dripping from his destroyed kneecap, Jaesung sags in Mingyu and Junhui's grips, gritting his teeth in an attempt to keep back a scream. And he looks at Jeonghan with so much hatred in his eyes, it only serves to piss him off more. But now is not the time nor place to properly punish him. So he turns around and faces the rest of his men. Slides his fingers into Chan's hair as Chan buries his face in Wonwoo's shoulder. Meets Wonwoo's watery eyes.

"You two, stay here with him," he orders. "Don't let him bleed out - he's not allowed to die yet. Am I understood?"

Wonwoo nods. "Yes sir."

He turns to Joshua next. "Alert the others. It'll be a bloodbath when we step in there and Jaesung's men realize that shot was mine. We need all the help we can get - especially if we're saving Seungcheol."

Joshua digs out his phone before Jeonghan even finishes speaking.

"The rest of you - get ready. And don't spare a single one of them."

Words of assent go up around him as he turns to the warehouse. Somewhere nearby he hears the roar of car engines, muffling Jaesung's pathetic whimpers. And somewhere in that warehouse Seungcheol is bleeding for his sins. Somewhere in that warehouse he is bleeding for Chan, for Seungkwan, for everyone… for Jeonghan.

"Hyung," Chan says so softly Jeonghan almost doesn't hear it. And when he meets his brother's tearful gaze, he knows what he has to do. "Save Cheol-hyung. Don't let him die, *please."*

"I won't let him die," Jeonghan says, and maybe the truth in his words should surprise him. But he's never wanted Seungcheol dead, not once. Not even in the meeting room, holding a gun to his head.

He turns back to the warehouse, Jaesung's pistol heavy in his hands, as the screech of tires on gravel sound behind him; as destiny stands before him.

There's no escaping it - so he takes a deep breath and moves toward it, his men following.

Notes for the Chapter:

next chapter we go to war OOF also who else is ready for junhui to torture the hell outta jaesung let's do this also :((((seungcheol :((((best boy :((((

Chapter 23

a/n:

For those of who might not follow me on twitter or haven't seen the news, I am discontinuing this version of "Ephemeral Gods". As I'm sure you all have realized my focus has shifted from this fic. It's become increasingly harder and harder to write it and so, for my own mental health, I have decided to stop writing it.

So that's the bad news. The good new is!

Coming December 25th, 2020: the rewrite of Ephemeral Gods.

It will have the same basic premise: undercover cop Seungcheol and crime boss Jeonghan, but it's going to be darker, grittier, with a heavier emphasis on gang activity. At this moment in time, I can't promise that it won't have major character death. I'll know before I post the first chapter and will tag it accordingly.

I'm upset that I couldn't finish my first big fic but this is for the best. I am so incredibly grateful to each and every one of you for your love and support since March; I am grateful for your patience with me.

I'm still deciding whether or not to keep this version of the fic up; I'll make my decision before December 25th and let you guys know!

Thank you all so much, I love you all!! <3

~ Serena

Author's Note:

twt | cc | ko-fi!